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# NOT ANOTHER POETESS: A STUDY OF FEMALE EXPERIENCE IN MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

JEANNINE DOBBS

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NOT ANOTHER POETESS:  
A STUDY OF FEMALE EXPERIENCE IN MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

By

JEANNINE DOBBS  
Ph.D., University of New Hampshire, 1973

A THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire  
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## ABSTRACT

### NOT ANOTHER POETESS:

#### A STUDY OF FEMALE EXPERIENCE IN MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

by

JEANNINE DOBBS

This study concerns poetry written out of uniquely female experience, primarily as it is written by modern American women. In this study, "female experience" includes familial, domestic, and sexual experiences common to women. In pursuing this study, I have tried to familiarize myself with the major American women poets, especially those of the twentieth century. Therefore, if a woman has a substantial reputation, writes out of her own female experience, and has written poems of representative or unusual interest, I have tried to include something of her work.

Traditionally, the use of female experience in poetry has not been a critically accepted practice. The bias against this type of poetry and critical bias against women poets in general are discussed in Chapter I. One purpose of this study is to examine women who write out of their own female experience today and possibly to predict where they are going. In order to do this, it is necessary to discover where they have been. Chapter II does this. It shows that through the end of the nineteenth century, women who wrote out of their own female experience usually did so unrealistically and sentimentally. A significant



change occurred, however, early in the twentieth century, and some of the women who contributed to this breakthrough are examined as a group in Chapter III. The first important American woman poet to write extensively out of her own female experience was Edna St. Vincent Millay. Chapter IV is devoted to her. Hers was one of the first female voices to express a liberated consciousness. Chapter V examines how women since Millay have used their female experiences both as subject and as metaphor. Sylvia Plath is examined in detail in Chapter VI because she is the most influential female poet since Millay. Her hostility towards men, her ambivalent attitude toward the traditional roles expected of women are classic. Plath represents female consciousness carried to its extreme. Finally, in Chapter VII, the work of six popular, living American women poets is reviewed: Gwendolyn Brooks, Denise Levertov, Anne Sexton, Erica Jong, Lyn Lifshin, and Marge Piercy. Thus, the study presents differing ways of looking at the subject: historical background, in-depth explication of the works of the two most important female poets of the century to date, classification of different uses of female experience, and reviews of the work of some contemporary figures.

This study of general background plus study in-depth of representative individuals has helped me to draw several conclusions. One is that we have neglected our inheritance. We have been quick to praise recent poets for originating awareness of women's problems or of breakthroughs in subject matter when poets such as Millay, Brooks, and Genevieve Taggard have been there long before us. Now, too, I see more clearly the dangers in women

writing out of their own female experience. Trivia may remain trivial. And many familial subjects are almost inherently sentimental--children, for example. Also, there is a trend today, perhaps in reaction against sentimentality, to be extremely militant. A hostile tone is becoming commonplace, and it may become boring. And when women, or men for that matter, write about their sexuality, there is the problem of making pornography rather than art. But I am also more aware of women's strengths. I believe that for many women poets, character portraits of other women or of women representative of womanhood in general are often outstanding. And that when women use their female experience as analogies for other experiences or as metaphors to explore, on a more subtle level, other subjects, they frequently create superior poems.

## CHAPTER I

### WOMEN AS WRITERS: THE CRITICAL CLIMATE

Them lady poets must not marry, pal.  
Miss Dickinson--fancy in Amherst bedding her.  
Fancy a lark with Sappho,  
a tumble in the bushes with Miss Moore,  
a spoon with Emily, while Charlotte glare.  
Miss Bishop's too noble--O.  
(from "Four Dream Songs" by John Berryman)

A cardinal rule for the beginning writer: write about what you know. It is a good rule, as rules go, except, as women writers know, it often does not apply to them. Historically, limitations--social, educational, political, and physical--have fairly well restricted women's areas of knowledge to their bodies and their domestic roles. They know about menstruation and menopause, about childbearing and childrearing, about being mistresses and wives and cooks and decorators. Not good enough, male writers, male critics, male readers, and even other women have said to them. No one is interested in reading about all that trivia. Of course some women did and do write about domestic subjects and about their lives as women in spite of these caveats. And sometimes, especially in the past, their writing has been trivial and boring. But an examination of how women poets have used their female experience reveals that in spite of the many, serious limitations inherent in its nature, some women have produced valuable creative works using it for subject and for metaphor.

A typical example, by a contemporary female poet, Rosellen Brown, is the beginning of a poem entitled "The Famous Writers School Opens Its Arms in the Next Best Thing to Welcome":

Good writing, the book tells you,  
begins at home.

. . .

You are obedient. You write about your kitchen.  
"Everything I hate.  
It is the place where all the accidents happen."  
You are standing at your stove  
Shaking the saucepan  
the way you'd shake a child,  
to hurry along the coffee-water.

"I think I have something to say,"  
you say, separating some of your children,  
always tangled up like hair.

(Some Deaths in the Delta: 1970)

Shaking a saucepan like a child, children tangled up like hair--  
unexpected, accurate, original observations. Good writing. A  
good example of using what you know. There are many women writing  
today who use their experience as successfully. This thesis will  
examine some of them.

Unfortunately, however, domestic poetry is not a universally  
accepted genre. Many literary critics still degrade domesticity or  
anything specifically concerned with women or with the home. In  
the late 1950's, Donald Hall, whose poetry recently has become  
increasingly domestic, attacked domesticity as being provincial and  
evasive.<sup>1</sup> Hall believed that domestic poets focus on the here and  
now at the expense of history; and that they do so because of their

1

"Ah, Love, Let Us Be True: Domesticity and History in  
Contemporary Poetry," American Scholar, XXVIII (1958-1959), 310-319.

2  
ignorance of the larger world, its culture and its traditions.

What Hall ignores is that for a woman domesticity has been a large part of history. For a woman, domesticity has been, traditionally, a universal concern.

In a more recent article, John W. Aldridge bemoans "the small housekeeping details of life, the sweaty anxieties of simple, average people, the sexual daydreams of bored housewives" he finds<sup>3</sup> in today's literature. He observes that because modern literature concerns itself with such subjects, people whose lives encompass such experience can now call themselves writers. He lists the following professions as those commonly claimed by writers in the biographical notes about contributors to literary journals:

"members of University faculties, writers employed to teach writing to writers, owners of farms outside Little Rock or Iowa City, where in their spare time they raise cotton or pigs, or . . . Connecticut exurbanites, free-lance editors in New York, storekeepers in Scarsdale--all so evidently respectable, responsible, and ordinary."<sup>4</sup> Although his attack is not directed toward women writers specifically but against all writers who lead what he terms "middle class" lives (and use these experiences in their writing),

2  
Ibid.

3  
"The Writer's Demotion to Solid-Citizen Status," Saturday Review, September 18, 1971, p. 81.

4  
Ibid.

it is obvious that many contemporary women poets would fit nicely into such a list. They are, like Kay Boyle, members of University faculties; like Maxine Kumin, employed to teach writing to writers; or like Fanny Howe and Rosellen Brown, wives of middle-class working men. Aldrich's thesis is that such "pedestrian" experience leads to "pedestrian vision"; such "average existence . . . most often produce[s] averageness."<sup>5</sup> Of course there is the danger that such pedestrianism may occur; but he cites no examples, male or female, of modern writers who transcend their experience or, what is equally important, use it to create meritorious art. It takes only one or two names to refute such nihilism: Wallace Stevens, insurance company vice-president; Joyce Carol Oates, university literature professor.

Not only have critics disparaged domesticity as not suitably elevated and serious for poetry, but some women writers themselves have hated it, rejected it, wanted to escape from it in their work. Much modern poetry legitimizes--in fact, invites--all levels of experience for use as both subject and metaphor. At the same time, however, one researcher observes that modern young women are rejecting the "tranquil dailiness" and the "benign domesticity of the orderly everyday" they find in Anne Sexton and identifying instead with the madness and suicidal extremes of Sylvia Plath.<sup>6</sup> I find sufficient madness and suicidal extremes in

5

Ibid.

6

Nancy Jo Hoffman, "Reading Women's Poetry: The Meaning and Our Lives," College English, October 1972, pp. 48-59.

Sexton to question the choice of her as a foil for Plath. But I accept as probable the thesis that militantly feminist readers reject all use of feminine experience in writing unless it is used for militantly feminist writing, even when, in the hands of the skillful, the proverbial transformation occurs from sow's ear to silk purse. This current rejection of domesticity by part of their audience many increase the number of women writers who seek to avoid, suppress, disguise, or transcend their female consciousness. Thus, the present seems an ideal time for this study, a study showing how women successfully use their own experience non-militantly as well as militantly. It is time to illustrate that women who write out of their own experience can create works for which no woman, surely, need be apologetic or ashamed.

Also, incredibly, women are still fighting the age-old myth that perhaps they should not--perhaps cannot--write at all. It is probably not difficult to imagine the following being penned in 1631: "In stead of Song and Music let them learn Cookery and Laundry, and in stead of reading Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia, let them read the grounds of good huswifery. I like not a female poetess at any hand."<sup>7</sup> But it is more difficult to accept the fact that in 1965 Louis Simpson stated in The New York Times that women make better audiences for poetry than they do poets, probably because once they have made a baby, that takes care of their

7

Thomas Powell, Tom of All Trades, or the Plaine Path-way to Preferment (1631). Quoted by Louis B. Wright, Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England (Chapel Hill, 1935), p. 111.

8

creative impulses. Or that even more recently and more bluntly Norman Mailer said in Advertisements for Myself that "the one thing a writer has to have is balls."

Mailer's remark is a general one, but as in the case of Simpson, the antagonism expressed towards women writers often is directed specifically towards women who write poetry. Perhaps this is because poetry is thought to employ the highest degree of the creative faculties and because literary creation and procreation are considered to be very closely related. As Rumer Godden, herself a poet, puts it: "To write a poem is an experience into which the whole of the poet must go; in it he must be reborn and one cannot be born oneself if one is continually giving birth. This is what a womanly woman does; she spends her days creating and recreating, not only in her children but in the ordering of her home; she spends, perhaps hours a day, in making and unmaking her appearance, her clothes; she is attached, intimate in her relations with her family and her friends; she is personal in her very cooking, in her sewing, even in arranging the flowers." Thus Godden answers her title question, "Do Women Make Good Poets?" with a very qualified and not very satisfactory, yes: only if they are not good wives and mothers; only if they are content to be alone.

8

VI (May 23, 1965), 21. Simpson, however, is an advocate for domestic poetry (written by men). "There is material in everyday life," he writes, "for a poetry that will be neither esoteric nor banal. Except in Whitman and Hart Crane we have had very little of this poetry in America. . . . We are still waiting for the poetry of feeling, words as common as a loaf of bread, which yet give off vibrations." Harper's, CCXXXI (October, 1965), 173.

9

"Do Women Make Good Poets?" Saturday Review, January 5, 1952, p. 8.



There is plenty of evidence to support Godden. The number of women writers who never married, or who married and never raised children, or who did both but who suffered severe conflicts are legion and have been frequently noted. Conspicuous among poets, for example, are Emily Dickinson and Amy Lowell--unmarried "eccentrics"; Edna St. Vincent Millay--childless, undomestic; Sara Teasdale--undomestic, divorced out of the belief her marriage interfered with her career, suicide; Sylvia Plath--two children, conflicts with career, separation from her husband, madness, suicide. Women who have written testaments to the conflicts they find between fulfilling traditional women's roles and striving for careers as writers are also legion. Adrienne Rich says, for example, that when she was having her family she found her poetic output vastly diminished.<sup>10</sup> Anne Sexton believes that in order for a woman to raise a family and write, she must have been born with an "extra amount" of creativity, of emotion, and of the ability to make order.<sup>11</sup> Early in this century, Amy Lowell mused in blank verse about women as writers and connected their problems with their sexual and domestic roles in a poem called "The

10

"Talking with Adrienne Rich," David Kalstone, Saturday Review, April 22, 1972, pp. 56-59. This is precisely the conflict Sylvia Plath encountered. When her children were born she could not write, but she did write--perhaps at the expense of her sanity and her life. (See Chapter VI.)

11

"Interview with Anne Sexton," Patricia Marx, Hudson Review, XVIII (Winter 1965-66), 565. Sexton also believes that "perhaps men are better writers" because they do not deplete these talents in the everyday lives.

**Sisters":**

Taking us by and large, we're a queer lot  
We women who write poetry. And when you think  
How few of us there've been, it's queerer still.  
I wonder what it is that makes us do it,  
Singles us out to scribble down, man-wise,  
The fragments of ourselves. Why are we  
Already mother-creatures, double-bearing,  
With matrices in body and in brain?  
I rather think that there is just the reason  
We are so sparse a kind of human being;  
The strength of forty thousand Atlases  
Is needed for our every-day concerns.

. . .

(What's O'Clock: 1925)

Such awareness and such testaments are not new. Women have long been aware of these conflicts, and expression of them is also found in early verse. Approximately 250 years ago, for example, a British poet named Mary Oxlie wrote:

Perfection in a woman's work is rare.  
From an untroubled mind should verses flow;  
My discontents made mine too muddy show;  
And hoarse encumbrances of household care,  
Where those remain the Muses ne'er repair.  
(A Book of Woman's Verse, an anthology: 1921)

Perhaps in some cases, the personality that finds an outlet in creative housekeeping is antithetical to the personality that finds one in writing. Few successful men writers have pursued full-time careers that were not in some way related to their writing. For most women, household duties have comprised a full-time career. But many women have testified to the fact that they are inclined to do both and that it is merely a lack of  
12  
sufficient time and energy that prohibits them.

12

Even superchauvinist Mailer admits that had he a house to run, he could do it only at the cost of his writing . . . and "so he could not know whether he would have found it endurable to be born a woman or if it would have driven him out onto the drear avenues of madness." The Prisoner of Sex (New York, 1971), p. 14.

Virginia Woolf was not the first to analyze extensively the woman writer's problems, but her book A Room of One's Own (1929) remains a classic. It is here that we can still turn for historical insights into why women have not been (good) writers: their early lack of an education and their later lack of an equal one, their inferior social and political position as chattels, possessions of men.

Incidentally, in 1929 Woolf believed that it would take one hundred years of a room of her own for a woman to make it as a poet. If success is measured by publication and prizes, figures show that Woolf's prophecy may be fairly accurate. Although representation in anthologies and periodicals has increased, women are still a long way from equal representation. In 1929, one editor observed that in a contemporary collection poems by women made up 23% of the total.<sup>13</sup> In 1972, Carol Jennings reported that in the New York Quarterly in issues one through ten [1970<sup>14</sup> to 1972] poems by women make up not quite 33<sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub>% of the total. The novelist Tillie Olsen has ascertained that of the writers of achievement in this century, women number one out of twelve.<sup>15</sup> And in fifty years of Pulitzer prizes awarded for poetry, only

<sup>13</sup>  
Lewis Worthington Smith, Women's Poetry Today (New York), p. xii.

<sup>14</sup>  
"The Woman Poet," New York Quarterly, Fall, 1972.

<sup>15</sup>  
"Women Who Are Writers in Our Century: One Out of Twelve," College English, XXXIV (October 1972), 6-17.

16

ten have been given to women.

The important question of why women have not written (more or better) seems to have several obvious answers. Woolf and others have vividly described the problems women encounter because of their domestic responsibilities and the treatment of them as cultural inferiors. But the critical reception of women poets and the disparagement of subjects which might be termed natural to them are equally important reasons for their failure to produce memorable literature.

Obviously everyone is sensitive to criticism. It is impractical to think that poets do not react to what is said about their work; it is usually impossible, of course, to know how much they are affected or exactly in what directions they are led. It is a fact, however, that women have not traditionally had a favorable critical climate in which to work. Much criticism of women poets has been and still may be categorized as hostile, stereotyped, condescending, and what Mary Ellmann terms as being

16

These were:

- 1923 Edna St. Vincent Millay (The Harp-Weaver)
- 1926 Amy Lowell (What's O'Clock)
- 1927 Leonora Speyer (Fiddler's Farewell)
- 1935 Audrey Wurdemann (Bright Ambush)
- 1938 Marya Zaturenska (Cold Morning Sky)
- 1950 Gwendolyn Brooks (Annie Allen)
- 1952 Marianne Moore (The Collected Poems)
- 1956 Elizabeth Bishop (Poems, North and South)
- 1961 Phyllis McGinley (Times Three)
- 1968 Anne Sexton (Live or Die)

In addition, two prizes were awarded to women by the Poetry Society before the Pulitzer became the official award. These went to:

- 1918 Sara Teasdale (Love Songs)
- 1919 Margaret Widdemer (Old Road to Paradise)

17  
"phallic." The most blatantly obvious examples of such critical treatment are often found in early reviews, but modern criticism has its share. Sometimes contemporary critics employ more subtle tactics, but the degradation is still there.

Perhaps the cruelest comment ever made about a female writer was elicited by news of the death of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Hearing of her death, the poet and critic Edward FitzGerald remarked: "No more Aurora Leighs, thank god!"

Some critics who have not been busy debating whether women can or should write poetry at all have attempted to define the general qualities women poets supposedly possess. Thus, just as the stereotyped black is said to have natural rhythm, the female poet is said to have refined sensibilities, to be extremely sincere. Blacks are lazy; female poets are sentimental, over-emotional. Even female critics and female poets themselves make such generalizations. Virginia Moore claims female poets can write a good lyric but not a great epic, and the epic has long been considered by many to be the epitome of verse.<sup>18</sup> Louise Bogan implies that if only more women (like Sandra Hochman) could get the hang of surrealism, there would be more successful female

17  
Thinking About Women (New York, 1968).

18  
"Women Poets," The Bookman, LXXI (July 1930), 388-395. Moore claims women's failure with the epic stem from their lack of two necessary qualities: a dramatic sense and a philosophical disposition.

19  
poets.

Where can critics be found who are similarly concerned over the listing of qualities of male poets? (Of course there is no such thing as "male" poets, there are only poets and female poets.) Even when the generalizations about women are true, pointing them out is used as a device to degrade female poets. Women's fine sensibility and sincerity are mentioned patronizingly, damning by faint praise. These or similar attributes are often followed by the conjunction but . . . . If women are more subjective than men, it is implied, this is inferior to the male's trait of being more objective.

Traditionally, poetry by women has been dealt with in a condescending manner. It is good work "for a woman." R. W. Griswold, an early editor (The Female Poets of America, 1848) was "skeptical" of his job of bringing out a collection of poetry by women and "surprised" when he discovered in some of the works "as high and sustained a range of poetic art, as the female genius  
20  
of any age or country can display."

As the contemporary poet Erica Jong writes in her poem entitled "Bitter Pills for Dark Ladies":

the ultimate praise is always a question of nots:  
viz. not like a woman  
viz. "certainly not another 'poetess'"  
(Fruits and Vegetables: 1968)

19  
"Verse," The New Yorker, April 27, 1963, pp. 173-174.

20  
(Philadelphia), Preface p. 8. Italics are mine.

Her quote is taken from Robert Lowell's introduction to Sylvia Plath's Ariel poems. Lowell praises Plath as being "hardly a person at all, or a woman, certainly not another 'poetess'"; but later he comments upon Plath's "modest, womanish touch."

Concerning her term "phallic criticism," Mary Ellmann says, "Books by women are treated as though they themselves were women, and criticism embarks, at its happiest, upon an intellectual<sup>21</sup> measuring of busts and hips." One perfect example of this type of criticism is found in a review of Erica Jong's book Fruits and Vegetables. In this short (five paragraph) article, the reviewer, James Whitehead, devotes an entire paragraph to Jong's appearance. "On the back of the dust jacket is a picture of Erica Jong," Whitehead writes, "and Erica Jong is beautiful. Her blonde hair streams around her head and down her shoulders. She is lovely, with the most interesting mouth this reviewer has seen in years,<sup>22</sup> in a photograph." In turn, Jong sorrowfully alludes to this incident in a recent article: "Even [women writers'] greatest successes are tinged with failure. They are never praised without being patronized. Their jacket photographs are reviewed instead of<sup>23</sup> their books."

<sup>21</sup>  
Elmann, p. 29.

<sup>22</sup>  
"Leaping Ghazals and Inside Jokes Concealed in Tropes," Saturday Review, December 18, 1971, p. 39.

<sup>23</sup>  
"The Artist as Housewife/The Housewife as Artist," MS, December 1972, p. 100.

Thus, criticism may have been negative enough, hurting enough, to keep some sensitive women from writing at all. Certainly, many women have tried consciously or unconsciously to disguise their sex, hiding behind initials or nom de plumes. For example, Edna St. Vincent Millay's first poetic success, "Renaissance," was published as having been written by E. St. Vincent Millay. Editors and readers thought this a male signature. Hilda Doolittle always signed her work merely H. D. Erica Jong says of her own early work: "I tried to sound either male or neuter. Despite Emily Dickinson, poetry for me was a masculine noun." <sup>24</sup> Also, Virginia Woolf's "guess" that "Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman" <sup>25</sup> may be highly accurate.

This generally adverse critical climate and women's awareness of it has brought to a head the important question of how women should write. Should they write in a consciously female voice? Should they write about themselves? About what they know? About their uniquely female experience? Virginia Woolf thought not, and she has many disciples today. "It is fatal," she wrote, "for a woman . . . in any way to speak consciously as a woman. . . . for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to

24

Ibid.

25

A Room of One's Own (New York, 1957), p. 51.



death. . . . it cannot grow in the minds of others."<sup>26</sup>

One female editor wants these words of Woolf's framed and adds: "Greater themes should be the watchword of every woman

writing today!"<sup>27</sup> Another of Woolf's disciples endorses "a

transcendence of gender."<sup>28</sup>

Erica Jong makes a great display of her outrage against such self-negating philosophy and militantly demands for women the freedom to write as women about any subject. But Jong's statement, "Once women writers are able to write freely about being women, they will be able to write freely about being human,"<sup>29</sup> qualifies her otherwise strongly feminist stand. Are women, then, not human beings? Why must women eradicate their sexuality to be human? Would men make such a statement? To me, this is just another manifestation of a female inferiority complex. Of course to be good, writers need to be sensitive to those who are different from themselves--to males or females or homosexuals or children or old people or blacks or whites or Indians, etc. To as many other

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 108. Of course, part of Woolf's exhortations were directed specifically to militant feminists who were using their writing for propaganda purposes. To this extent, her position is tenable. Also, she applauds Jane Austen and Emily Bronte for writing "as women write, not as men write." Ibid., p. 78. Her opinions have been extended beyond her intentions by her modern admirers.

<sup>27</sup> Tooni Gordi (ed.), Contemporary American Women Poets (New York, 1936). This anthology, however, contains many poems obviously by and about women.

<sup>28</sup> "The Woman Poet," Carol Jennings, New York Quarterly, Fall 1972.

<sup>29</sup> "The Artist as Housewife . . .," p. 105.

conditions of humanity as it is possible for their sensibilities to encounter. To do this, however, they do not need to exaggerate their own condition, or to ignore it.

On the other side of this debate are writers such as Hortense Calisher and Adrienne Rich. Calisher asserts not only that women should write as women and about what they know, but also that "no important woman writer . . . has really wanted to write 'like a man.' They had too much taste."<sup>30</sup> Perhaps this is true for "important" women writers; for average women, however,<sup>31</sup> my own experience tells me it is not so.

Rich, having won a hard struggle to find her own voice and to liberate herself from the doctrine that "poetry should be 'universal,' which meant, of course, non female,"<sup>32</sup> goes far in her support of a separate, individual, and personal voice for women. She views males and females as so different, as living in such different worlds, that literature becomes a means for communication between the sexes. Again, this seems to me to be an exaggerated position.

30

"Women Re Women," Mademoiselle, February 1970, p. 272.

31

An informal experiment which attempted to define "masculine" and "feminine" voice was performed by graduate students in my department. The one obvious result was that the women whose writing was judged to be "masculine" were flattered; those whose writing was termed "feminine," were hurt, disappointed, or insulted.

32

"When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," College English, XXXIV (October 1972), 24.

The debate about how women should write has been conducted primarily by women, but men have occasionally stated their opinions. These opinions, however, are usually naive, superficial, or condescending. An early (1899) anonymous (but surely male) critic justifies interest in women writing about their own condition by naively observing: "Women writing about themselves give a different impression of woman-hood from that which has been created in presentment of it by men."<sup>33</sup> R. W. Griswold believed that an infusion of domesticity might "temper" American literature, which in reflecting American society, had been criticized as being "too much devoted to business and politics."<sup>34</sup> Edward Morgan's observations are more significant, however, because he is a modern critic (1950) publishing a long (30 page) scholarly article in a major journal (Cambridge Journal) expressing amazingly narrow and prejudiced views. Morgan feels that a woman naturally possesses only minor qualities as a writer--<sup>35</sup> suitable for recording and not creating. Since he finds her work is not academic, not metaphysical, not allusive, not obscure, not descriptive, not intellectual, and not ambiguous--

33

"Some Women Poets," Living Age, April 1-8, 1899, p. 33.

34

The Female Poets of America, p. 8.

35

"Women and Poetry," Cambridge Journal, III (August 1950), 643-673.

rather simple and direct--he believes that recording her love  
life is a woman's best, most suitable subject.<sup>36</sup> Obviously Morgan  
is interested only in degrading the woman writer. He finds her  
talent "minor"; and since he blindly defines her "experience" in  
terms of her love life, he allows her a subject he finds suitably  
lowly.

Of course a woman's love life is only a small part of her  
experience. But the attitude that distinctly female experience is  
inferior or somehow beneath the dignity of art is widespread.<sup>37</sup>  
Virginia Woolf analyzes this attitude in terms of values prevalent  
in our patriarchal culture. Men and women have different values;  
yet it is the values of the male that dominate. Thus, as Woolf  
writes: "Speaking crudely, football and sport are 'important';  
the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes 'trivial.' And  
these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction.  
This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals  
with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the  
feelings of women in a drawing-room."<sup>38</sup>

Again, Woolf's comment is a classic. It evokes the

36

Ibid.

37

As an editor puts it: "Life cannot mean to women quite  
what it means to men. Their activities can only approach those of  
men; they can never be the same." Smith, p. xviii. (Italics are  
mine.)

38

Woolf, p. 77.

historically prevalent critical distinctions between subjects that might be called natural to male and female writers. Of course men have a domestic life too; and a woman could write a war novel without having been to war, just as Stephen Crane did. Hopefully, the time is coming when no topic will be disparaged or condemned out of hand, and when critical judgment will be reserved for what the writer does with the particular subject. Hopefully, too, each writer then will be judged individually and not as a representative of one or the other sex.

## CHAPTER II

### DOMESTICITY IN ENGLISH POETRY: PRE-TWENTIETH CENTURY

At verses she was not inept,  
Her feet were neatly numbered.  
She never cried, she softly wept,  
She never slept, she slumbered.  
(from "Poetess" by John Updike)

The beginnings of women writing poetry in English are vague. Certainly early women poets were few and their work largely has been forgotten or lost. The first use of the term "poetess" is found, according to the Oxford English Dictionary,<sup>39</sup> to be 1530. The earliest allegation of female authorship is made for an anonymous poem entitled "The Flower and the Leaf" (c.<sup>40</sup> 1450). But the case for the contention that this poem was written by a woman is based on dubious criteria. One critic, for example, favors a female author because: "The most characteristic thing [in the poem] is the continual reference to colours, dresses, ornaments, and decorations. In (The Flower) we have descriptions of . . . white surcoats, velvet seams, emeralds, purfils, colours, sleeves, trains, pearls, diamonds, and fret of gold, . . . [etc.]."

<sup>39</sup> The possible initiator of the term, according to the OED, is the martyr Tyndale. The same source records that a Lady Luxborough was the first known woman (1748) to take written umbrage at the term: "I am no Poetess; which reproachful name I would avoid, even if I were capable of acquiring it."

<sup>40</sup> This poem has also been accredited to Chaucer, although some authorities feel its diction indicates the date of c. 1450. Meum Stewart (ed.), The Distaff Muse (London, 1949), p. 4.

Then there is a company all cald in one suit (or livery); heralds and pursuivants, more chaplets and excutcheons, men in armour with cloth of gold and horse-trappings, with bosses on their bridles and peitreles--it is surely needless to go on, though we have only arrived at line 246."<sup>41</sup> Using such criteria, it is obvious what kind of speculation The Fairie Queene would have elicited, had its author chosen to remain anonymous.

The first known woman to write verse in English is Dame Juliana Barnes.<sup>42</sup> Her date of birth is reported to have been near the end of the fourteenth century.<sup>43</sup> However, her writing can only nominally be termed poetry because it consists of a treatise on Hunting written by a man and transposed by her into rhyming verses.<sup>44</sup> Queen Elizabeth I and Mary Queen of Scots are alleged to have written poetry, but their authorship is highly speculative.<sup>45</sup> Other early women poets such as Anne Askewe (c. 1520-1546), Lady Mary Wroth (d. 1620) and Sir Philip Sidney's sister the Countess of Pembroke (d. 1621) have been largely for-

<sup>41</sup>  
As quoted by Stewart, pp. 4-5.

<sup>42</sup>  
George W. Bethune, The British Female Poets (Philadelphia, 1848), p. 13.

<sup>43</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>  
Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>  
Stewart, pp. 9-10.

gotten.

In the seventeenth century, two events occurred of significance to this study. One was the use by Puritan poets such as Edward Taylor of commonplace, homely things of this world as emblems standing for larger concerns, often for the things of the next world.<sup>46</sup> The other was the appearance of the first female poet in America.

The Puritan aesthetic, of course, forbade the use of strictly sensuous imagery, or imagery used for decorative purposes alone. In addition, the Puritans were writing for an audience composed of common men on whom classical rhetoric or abstract philosophising would be lost. Thus, the Puritans drew on the life and the experiences around them, common to themselves and to their readers.<sup>47</sup>

Edward Taylor's "Huswifery" is probably the classic

46

With few exceptions, there is no early tradition of domesticity used seriously in poetry for subject or metaphor. Until the Puritans, examples of the use of domesticity are usually humorous or satiric. I have not attempted, of course, to trace the use of domesticity in Greek poetry. But interest in Sappho on the part of female poets has been extensive, and her work has undoubtedly been influential. Her poems and fragments contain many love lyrics and a few of these do express her emotions in terms of domestic experience. The following is one example:

If you will come

I shall put out  
new pillows for  
you to rest on

(Translated by Mary Barnard, Berkeley, 1965.)

47

My generalizations in this paragraph are based on Kenneth B. Murdock, Literature and Theology in Colonial New England (New York 1940), pp. 49-59. The Puritan theologians as well as the poets based the writing of their sermons on the same principles.



poetical example of the Puritan technique:

Make me, O Lord, thy Spining wheele compleate.  
Thy Holy worde my Distaff make for mee.  
Make mine Affections thy Swift Flyers neate  
And make my Soule thy holy Spoole to bee.  
My Conversation make to be thy Reelee  
And reele the yarn thereon spun of thy Wheele.

Make me thy Loom then, knit therein this Twine:  
And make thy Holy Spirit, Lord, winde quills:  
Then weave the Web thyselfe. The yarn is fine.  
Thine Ordinances make my Fulling Mills.  
Then dy the same in Heavenly Colours Choice,  
All pinkt with Varnisht Flowers of Paradise.

Then cloath therewith mine Understanding, Will,  
Affections, Judgment, Conscience, Memory  
My Words, and Actions, that their shine may fill  
My wayes with glory and thee glorify.  
Then mine apparell shall display before yee  
That I am Cloathd in Holy robes of glory.

(The Poems of Edward Taylor: 1960)

In "The Lilly of the Vallies," Taylor portrays his soul as the Lord's garden; the concluding line of the first stanza reads: "Be thou my Flowers, I'll be thy Flower Pot." In "All Things Are Yours," Satan is a cook and sin the sauce to which the speaker has unhappily become addicted. Of course other Puritan poets of the period were employing the same types of images and metaphors.

Hyatt Waggoner's study of the Puritan poets, however, reveals that

48

Taylor makes the most use of "carnal things."

48

American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present (Boston, 1968), p. 16. For other examples of domestic metaphor employed by Puritan poets see "On a Fortification at Boston begun by Women" by Benjamin Thomas or "A Poem upon the Translation of a Mother" by John Danforth, pp. 236 and 320 respectively of Seventeenth Century American Poetry, ed. by Harrison T. Meserole (New York, 1968).

The second event of importance during this period was the emigration of Anne Bradstreet from the old world to the new, making her the first known American female poet. Bradstreet was also a Puritan; but, unfortunately, she did not elect to use domesticity in her devotional poetry in the metaphorical or symbolical Puritan manner. If the date of her birth (c. 1612) and that of Edward Taylor (c. 1642) had been reversed, perhaps the tradition of American poetry would have been different. Since she died when Taylor was only thirty, he could have had little or  
49  
no influence on her work.

Bradstreet, however, did write directly about her female experience. There are poems expressing great love for her husband; a poem called "Concerning Her Children" in which the children are portrayed as birds leaving the nest--she bore eight children; and sentimental elegies on the deaths of grandchildren. Perhaps most interesting, several stanzas in the Prologue to "The Four Elements" (a long philosophical poem dealing generally in abstractions) reflect her sensitivity to her position as a "female" poet:

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue  
Who says my hand a needle better fits,  
A Poets pen all scorn I should thus wrong,  
For such despite they cast on Female wits:

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Some of the Puritan divines, however, predate her.

If what I do prove well, it won't advance,  
They'll say it's stoin, or else it was by chance.  
(The Works of Anne Bradstreet: 1932)50

Perhaps fearing this was too outspoken, she adds, almost as a retraction, a succeeding stanza:

Let Greeks be Greeks, and women what they are,  
Men have precedency and still excell,  
It is but vain unjustly to wage warre;  
Men can do best, and women know it well.  
Preheminence in all and each is yours;  
Yet grant some small acknowledgement of ours.  
(Ibid.)

Also of interest is Bradstreet's "The Author to Her Book," a poem occasioned by a pirated publication of her poems (1650):

Thou ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain,  
Who after birth did'st by my side remain,  
Till snatcht from thence by friends, less wise then true  
Who thee abroad, expos'd to publick view,  
Made thee in raggs, halting to th' press to trudge,  
Where errors were not lessened (all may judge)  
At thy return my blushing was not small,  
My rambling brat (in print) should mother call,  
I cast thee by as one unfit for light,  
Thy Visage was so irksome in my sight;  
Yet being mine own, at length affection would  
Thy blemishes amend, if so I could:  
I wash'd thy face, but more defects I saw,  
And rubbing off a spot, still made a flaw.  
I stretcht thy joynts to make thee even feet,  
Yet still thou run'st more hobbling then is meet;  
In better dress to trim thee was my mind,  
But nought save home-spun Cloth, i' th' house I find  
In this array, 'mongst Vulgars mayst thou roam  
In Criticks hands, beware thou dost not come;  
And take thy way where yet thou art not known,  
If for thy Father askt, say, thou hadst none:  
And for thy Mother, she alas is poor,  
Which caus'd her thus to send thee out of door.  
(Ibid.)

The conceit of the book as a child was already a cliché by the time Bradstreet employed it, but the poem remains one of her more memorable efforts. The grooming and the "home-spun Cloth" are fine minute details, and the entire poem is more concrete than most of her works. This extended domestic simile is employed in the Puritan manner; but, of course, its significance is not the same--it is not as serious--as if it had been employed for a devotional subject.

If she had not been the first, Anne Bradstreet most probably would have joined the list of forgettable and forgotten American female poets who preceded Emily Dickinson. Indeed, Bradstreet was "the only woman poet in America in the seventeenth century."<sup>51</sup>

In the second half of the seventeenth century, the British poet, novelist, and dramatist Aphra Behn (1640-1689) foreshadowed work by American women by over two hundred years. Behn,<sup>52</sup> whose novel Orinooko was the first novel by a woman in English, wrote some explicitly defensive verse in the manner of Bradstreet rebutting the descrimination against her plays because of her

<sup>51</sup>  
Mary Harned, "Early Women Poets of America, Poet Lore, June 1893, p. 334.

<sup>52</sup>  
In recent years, American women writers have acknowledged their debt to Behn by naming the journal Aphra for her. Behn not only wrote the first novel by a woman, she was the first professional female writer, competing in the literary market with men. Also, she worked for "intellectual emancipation of women as well as an end to forced marriage, and she wrote what is probably the first abolition novel." "Aphra Behn: Novelist, Spy, Libertine," Fred G. Shapiro, MS, February 1973, p. 17.

53

sex. The following, for example, is from the Epilogue to her play Sir Patient Fancy:

What has poor Woman done, that she must be  
Debar'd from Sense, and sacred Poetry? . . .  
To all the men of Wit we will subscribe:  
But for her half Wits, you unthinking Tribe,  
We'll let you see, whate'er besides we do,  
How artfully we copy some of you:  
And if you're drawn to th' Life, pray tell me then,  
Why Women should not write as well as Men.

But Behn's more interesting and more unusual contributions are her liberated lyrics, which predate those of Edna St. Vincent Millay by more than two centuries. The following lines from "Amyntas Led Me to a Grove" illustrate her frank (for the seventeenth century) and charming philosophy concerning sex:

A many Kisses he did give,  
And I return'd the same:  
Which made me willing to receive  
That which I dare not name.

His charming Eyes no aid requir'd,  
To tell their amorous Tale;  
On her that was already fir'd,  
'Twas easy to prevail.  
He did but kiss, and clasp me round,  
Whilst they his thoughts exprest,  
And laid me gently on the Ground;  
Oh! who can guess the rest?  
(The Distaff Muse: 1949)

The eighteenth century--like its predecessor--did not produce memorable American female poets. From a list of relatively memorable ones such as the classical and devotional poet Jane

53

Behn's work engendered so much hostility, she was demoted from "poetess" to "poetastress" by at least one of her contemporaries. (OED.)

Colman, the patriotic poet Mercy Warren, the nature poet Anne Eliza Bleeker, and the neo-classical poet Phyllis Wheatley, only the last named, Phyllis Wheatley, is likely to be at all familiar to the average student of poetry. And Phyllis Wheatley's fame lies more in her circumstances than in her work.

Wheatley was born in Africa in 1753 and brought to America as a slave when she was about seven. She was educated; and when her penchant for writing was discovered, she was encouraged. Her writing contains nothing which might be termed domestic; but this is perfectly predictable. She considered housekeeping so much beneath her dignity that, after her marriage, she categorically refused to do it.

Many nineteenth-century women poets deserve to be called "poetesses." By the term, I mean women writing for women, women writing sentimental or trite verse, women writing in the mode of Edgar Guest, who might be considered an Honorary Poetess. In the nineteenth century, most of these women were writing about home and family, God, nature, and country. Frequently, they also wrote about unhappy Indians or tragic historical and mythological heroines such as Penelope, the Virgin Mary, and Sappho. They usually idealized and sentimentalized all of these subjects, particularly the domestic ones. In poems in which they examined familial relationships, dead babies, dead mothers, dead fathers,

dead husbands, and dead lovers abound; thus the potential for sentimentality is heightened.

The following stanza from a poem called "Babyland" by Ella Wheeler Wilcox, first copyrighted in 1888, is representative of the mode and tone in which nineteenth-century women dealt with maternal subjects. She writes that new born babies

. . . go forth from the Valley of Babyland  
Forth into the world of great unrest,  
Sometimes in weeping, he wakes from sleeping  
Before he reaches the mother's breast.  
Ah, how she blesses him, how she caresses him,  
Bonniest bird in the bright home band,  
That o'er land and water, the kind stork brought her  
From far off Babyland.  
(Poems of Pleasure: 1900)

In regard to their roles as wives, the most praised attribute seems to be meekness. In a poem entitled "Woman," for example, Julia Ward Howe laments the fact that she lacks "a meek and quiet spirit," a quality she finds most admirable in women (Female Poets of America, Griswold: 1848). So common were portrayals of women, especially wives, in terms of their meekness and dependency that Elizabeth Oakes-Smith's poem "The Wife" has been taken by at least one critic as a representative and sincere  
55  
mid-Victorian portrait of the ideal wife.

All day, like some sweet bird, content to sing  
In its small cage, she moveth to and fro,  
And ever and anon will upward spring  
To her sweet lips, fresh from the fount below,  
The murmured melody of pleasant thought,  
Unconscious uttered, gentle-toned and low.  
Light household duties, evermore inwrought,

With placid fancies of one trusting heart  
That lives but in her smile and turns  
From life's cold seeming and the busy mart.  
With tenderness that heavenward ever yearns  
To be refreshed where one pure altar burns,  
Shut out from hence, the mockery of life,  
Thus liveth she content, the meek, fond, trusting  
wife.

(Ibid.)

But there is a very subtly ironic tone here which derives basically from the choice of a caged bird as a simile for the wife's existence. The fact that this sonnet's author was an active and prominent feminist makes it extremely unlikely that the irony is unintentional or unconscious. Other examples of tensions or contradictions between what is being said and how it is being said can be found during this period. In Margaret Sangster's poem "Mother's Work," the mother's role is described as extremely limited and limiting. The poet justifies motherhood not for any compensations but for what its absence implies. The second and fourth stanzas of this poem illustrate:

So wan and tired, the whole long day so busy;  
To laugh or weep, at times, you hardly know;  
So many trifles make the poor brain dizzy,  
So many errands call you to and fro.  
Small garments stitching, weaving fairy stories,  
And binding wounds and bearing little cares,  
Your hours pass; unheeded all the glories  
Of that great world beyond your nursery stairs.

And yet, I think you'd rather keep the babies,  
Albeit their heads grow weary on your arm,  
Than have the poet's fair, enchanted may-bes,--  
The artist's visions, rich with dazzling charm,  
Sweet are the troubles of the happy hours,  
For even in weariness your soul is blest;  
And rich contentment all your being dowers,  
That yours is not a hushed and empty nest.  
(Poems of the Household: 1896)



This poem is an example, too, of a woman poet juxtaposing the roles of wife and mother with that of poet. It is representative of the either/or choice that has traditionally been required of women and not usually required of men: that is, the choice between career and marriage. Many modern women writers have rebelled against having to make such a choice. And yet in trying to have both, when society has not provided acceptable alternatives to traditional patterns of behaviour and roles for men and women, many women have suffered severe conflicts.

Early poems about parents reveal the same flaws as early poems on other familial relationships. A stanza from Emily Judson's "To My Mother" illustrates:

I've not been long away, mother;  
Few suns have rose and set,  
Since last the tear-drop on thy cheek  
My lips in kisses met;  
'Tis but a little time, I know,  
But very long it seems,  
Though every night I come to thee,  
Dear mother, in my dreams.  
(The Female Poets of America: 1848)

Fathers, too were portrayed as perfect creatures and relationships with them were to be preferred over any others with a man. "A Daughter's Memory," by Mary Lawson, is representative:

. . .

My father, how the tear-drop swells  
As o'er the past my vision dwells;  
When I have stood beside thy chair  
And smooth'd and kiss'd thy silver hair,  
Whose silken threads are dearer now  
Than hope's gay dream or lover's vow,  
For life can hold no joy for me  
More cherish'd than my thought of thee.

. . .

(The American Female Poets: 1853)

Margaret Widdemer, an early twentieth-century poet whose best work is usually found in her verbal portraits of women, captures in "An Old Portrait" the essence of the nineteenth-century woman circumscribed by a narrow world but smilingly deceiving both herself and her outside world:

. . .  
She was a woman of the older day:  
She could not cry of elemental things,  
She suffered them, scarce knowing what they were--  
She could not speak of them aloud to men.

. . .  
Her passions hid themselves in sentiment  
Or broke in sobs at night-time silently  
Lest anyone should hear them and be grieved.  
She drugged her mind when all her work was through  
For a brief time, with other women's work,  
Stories of feverish love she dreamed might be,  
Or knew was not, or wished could be for her,  
Of women like herself, men she had seen  
Through the rose-glow of courtship long ago,  
Ere she was flung from haloed ignorance  
Into the pit of Truth her wedding-ring  
Was trap to--and through all the shock held still  
And smiled a little as she always smiled.

. . .  
(The Factories and Other Lyrics: 1915)

Not all women were meekly accepting or only obliquely critical of their condition during the nineteenth century. There are a few women who chose to use their poetic faculties to proselytize. Between Anne Bradstreet and the Victorians, however, few of these voices were heard. Robert E. Riegel in his book American Feminists records one example of an unknown voice crying out in 1789:

How wretched is poor woman's fate!  
No happy change her fortune knows;

Subject to man in ev'ry state,  
How can she then be free from woes?<sup>56</sup>

Riegel observes that even in the nineteenth century many women authors were complacent, primarily because, of the possible careers for women outside the home at that time, authorship was "the most socially acceptable."<sup>57</sup> And of course many of these women, such as Margaret Fuller, who did verbalize their dissatisfaction with their condition, did so in prose essay form rather than in verse. One woman who did speak out in verse is Maria Weston Chapman. Her satirical "The Times That Try Men's Souls," for example, is written tongue in cheek from the chauvinist males' point of view and signed "The Lords of Creation."<sup>58</sup>

Confusion has seized us, and all things go wrong,  
The women have leaped from 'their spheres.'  
And instead of fixed stars, shoot as comets along,  
And are setting the world by the ears!  
In courses erratic they're wheeling through space,  
In brainless confusion and meaningless chase.

In vain do our knowing ones try to compute  
Their return to the orbit designed;  
They're glanced at a moment then onward they shoot,  
And are neither 'to hold nor to bind':  
So freely they move in their chosen elipse,  
The 'Lords of Creation' do fear an eclipse.

<sup>56</sup>  
(Lawrence, Kansas, 1963), p. 6.

<sup>57</sup>  
Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>58</sup>  
This poem appeared in Catherine Berney, *The Grimké Sisters* (Boston and New York, 1885), p. 124. As quoted by Eleanor Flexner, Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), pp. 48-49.

They've taken a notion to speak for themselves,  
And are wielding the tongue and the pen;  
They've mounted the rostrum; the termagant elves,  
And--oh horrid!--are talking to men!  
With faces unblanched in our presence they come  
To harangue us, they say, in behalf of the dumb.

The primary exception to the babble of sentimental and occasionally militant female voices during this period, is, of course, Emily Dickinson. <sup>59</sup> Unlike the majority of women writers before, during, and even in some cases after her time, Dickinson sparingly uses her own female experience as subject.

Dickinson' poems are more often about Hope or Success or

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At this time in America there were not any major female poets using their feminist consciousness as the basis of a work in the manner of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Aurora Leigh. The heroine of this long, narrative poem published in 1856 reveals a mixture of attitudes toward herself as a woman and her role as a writer. Aurora Leigh at first defends her ambition. She feels women are capable of contributing more than the role of wife requires of them, and she says:

The works of women are symbolical,  
We sew, sew, pricke our fingers, dull our sight,  
Producing what? A pair of slippers, sir,  
To put on when you're weary--or a stool  
To stumble over and vex you . . . 'curse that stool!  
Or else at best, a cushion, where you lean  
And sleep, and dream of something we are not  
But would be for your sake. Alas, alas!

Aurora's cousin Romney ridicules her writing without having read it; he also ridicules her as a weakling and then asks her to marry him. "It's always so/" she replies, "anything does for a wife." Of course she rejects him. Later, however, having written books and made the kind of success a woman writer could expect at that time, Aurora has second thoughts:

I might have been a common woman now  
And happier . . .  
Perhaps a better woman after all,  
With chubby children hanging on my neck  
To keep me low and wise.

In facing her either/or decision, Aurora Leigh chooses in predictable nineteenth-century fashion, giving up the career to marry her cousin.

Death or Faith--about abstractions--than about Emily Dickinson, the woman and the poet. Often the "I" of her poems is simply a philosopher or an observer--often a child, perhaps a "boy"--a mask or a generalized voice, not a particularized speaker or the poet's own individualized voice. Among the exceptions, the poems that seem most personal are those in which she portrays herself as "Wife," that is, in a religious marriage with Jesus or with God. She also refers to herself as "Empress of Calvary." The "Wife" poems and the poems containing the latter allusion seem to indicate that she in some ways equated her suffering for love with that of Christ's. Analogies which exaggerate suffering in similar ways are also common to Sylvia Plath.

Most of Dickinson's use of female experience, then, is general rather than personal. Yet, in spite of never marrying and never keeping house, she alludes to these roles. She portrays few people in her poems, but prominent among the few are housewives. Some of her use of this kind of experience is figurative. Thus, she writes: "The Wind begun [sic] to knead the Grass--/As Women do a Dough--" (Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson: 1960). Or:

If you were coming in the Fall,  
I'd brush the Summer by,  
With half a smile, and half a spurn,  
As Housewives do, a Fly.

(Ibid.)

Although she was often struggling with her faith, there was a great deal of the Puritan about Dickinson. Like the Puritans, she used homely, everyday items as emblems for larger, or ultimate concerns.

Two of her better known short poems illustrate. The first is her denunciation of the false or counterfeit--of Hypocrisy, perhaps, or Expediency:

It dropped so low--in my Regard--  
I heard it hit the Ground--  
And go to pieces on the Stones  
At bottom of my Mind--

Yet blamed the Fate that flung it--less  
Than I denounced Myself,  
For entertaining Plated Wares  
Upon my Silver Shelf--  
(Ibid.)

The second uses a common table fork as part of a metaphor which seeks to deal with something not only larger and more significant, but something perhaps inexpressible in any other terms:

The Lightning is a yellow Fork  
From Tables in the sky  
By inadvertent fingers dropped  
The awful Cutlery

Of mansions never quite disclosed  
And never quite concealed  
The Apparatus of the Dark  
To ignorance revealed.  
(Ibid.)

In addition, Dickinson frequently wrote about death in terms of the most simple domestic experiences. The effect of this practice is to remove death from the realm of extraordinary, elevated experience and to reduce it to the level of the most common and everyday. In other words, she makes death very much a part of life rather than some secret, mysterious event to be spoken of only in terms of euphemism or not spoken of at all. For

example:

Ample make this Bed  
Make this Bed with awe--  
In it wait til Judgment break  
Excellent and Fair.

Be its Mattress straight--  
Be its Pillow round--  
Let no sunrise' yellow noise  
Interrupt this Ground--  
(Ibid.)

Thus, death (or the grave or the coffin) is just a comfortable place to go to await Life. The same thought again is expressed through a different domestic metaphor in the following:

The grave my little cottage is,  
Where 'Keeping house' for thee  
I make my parlor orderly  
And lay the marble tea.

For two divided, briefly,  
A cycle, it may be,  
Till everlasting life unite  
In strong society.  
(Ibid.)

For those who remain in this life, death brings literal domestic and metaphorical domestic duties as well:

The Bustle in a House  
The Morning after Death  
Is solemnest of industries  
Enacted upon Earth--

The Sweeping up the Heart  
And putting Love away  
We shall not want to use again  
Until Eternity.  
(Ibid.)

In her nature poems, Dickinson sometimes employs the rather common personification of nature as a woman. Two poems describing sundown, in particular, employ this personification.

"The Day undressed--Herself--/" one begins, "Her Garter--was of Gold--" (Ibid.). And the other, in its entirety, reads:

She sweeps with many-colored Brooms--  
And leaves the Shreds behind--  
Oh Housewife in the Evening West--  
Come back, and dust the Pond!

You dropped a Purple Ravelling on--  
You dropped an amber thread--  
And now you've littered all the East  
With Duds of Emerald!

And still, she plies her spotted Brooms,  
And still, the Aprons fly,  
Till Brooms fade softly into stars--  
And then I come away--

(Ibid.)

Dickinson has her faults--an occasionally too precious image, obscurity, excess magnification of the insignificant, to name a few--and she sometimes falls into the category of 'poetess'; but these times are rare compared to the performance of her contemporaries and even of many who followed her by as much as half a century. Dickinson had little influence on her own century because her work generally was not known. Her first collected volume did not appear until the 1890's. She was not critically acclaimed until the 1920's. Edna St. Vincent Millay had a copy of Dickinson in her library.<sup>60</sup> And Genevieve Taggard wrote a combined biography and critical study of Dickinson in 1930. Taggard illustrates the facts of Dickinson's life by quoting poems she thought were to be read autobiographically, and she praises Dickinson's courage in comparing "the grandeur of nature with a



man-made textile" as in Dickinson's "I'll tell you how the sun  
rose,--/A ribbon at a time" when "Mr. Higginson must have pointed  
out, as all teachers do, that [this conceit] is improper." <sup>61</sup> Yet,  
Dickinson's exact influence cannot be known or measured. But  
examination of her poems which employ feminine experience--both as  
a central metaphor for other experience and indirectly in images to  
provide new and fresh analogies between a woman's unique world and  
the world in general--reveals that historically she anticipates the  
twentieth century.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: PRE-MILLAY

The bric-a-brac of everyday  
Edges his fancy, seals his wit.  
He takes it up and looks at it  
And says what he has got to say.

Even a scuttleful of coals  
Feeding his fire impels a tale;  
A shovel and a child's tin pail  
Are documents his mind unrolls.

The fragments of a vanished host,  
Oddments of life and stones of death,  
The breathing rose, the tightened breath  
Arrest--as does the daily post.

Where should his brooding heart belong  
But in this bric-a-brac of hours  
Whose abstract difference empowers  
The concrete beauty of his song?

("In Defense of a Poet" by Jean Starr Untermeyer)

At the turn of the twentieth century, female domestic poets had a limited heritage on which to draw. With few exceptions, their predecessors had not come very far in 275 years. Like Bradstreet, Victorian women were still writing sentimentally about their families; occasionally a militant feminist attacked women's subjugated roles. Usually, however, the female Victorian poets glorified their husbands, their children, and their mothers. A few sentimentalized their relationships with their fathers as well, and some lamented the plight of unmarried women. The technique of Emily Dickinson--the use of female experience in more subtle and effective ways--did not develop until well into the twentieth

century.

The period from approximately 1915 to 1923 was one of great change and improvement in poetry by women. Women still wrote many poems about familial relationships, but they began to examine many more roles than before. They also began to acknowledge their bodies. They became concerned with the physical and psychological aspects of their feminine bodily functions, such as menstruation and pregnancy. Previously, women could not have dealt with such subjects--topics Victorian women would never have been allowed to deal with in print. Even though all subjects were not considered suitable for poetry, Victorian women could at least have treated the subjects that were open to them with more variety of tone. It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century, however, that women poets began to abandon sentimentality for matter-of-fact objectivity and to experiment with other tones, such as: humor, satire, irony, and sarcasm.

In 1923, Edna St. Vincent Millay published a seventeen sonnet sequence entitled "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" in her prize winning volume, The Harp-Weaver.<sup>\*</sup> This series of poems was the most successful extended and realistic use of domesticity by a major American female poet to that date. But writers do not work in a vacuum. They read other poets and their work is influenced consciously or unconsciously. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the climate in which Millay wrote.

\*

The complete text of these sonnets is to be found in the Appendix.

The opening up of new subjects in the first quarter of the twentieth century owes much to the literary movement, Imagism.

The proponents of this movement asserted that any subject be considered suitable for poetic treatment. <sup>62</sup>

This movement was endorsed by many major figures, including Amy Lowell and H. D., figures who, on other poetic grounds, had about as much in common <sup>63</sup> as steam shovels and tea roses.

By 1923, a number of important twentieth-century American women had published one or more volumes of poetry. In addition to Lowell and H. D. are well-known poets such as Marianne Moore, Sara Teasdale, Genevieve Taggard, Elinor Wylie, and Harriet Monroe as well as lesser-known poets such as Leonora Speyer, Hildegard Flanner, Margaret Widdemer, Hazel Hall, and Jean Starr Untermeyer. It seems significant that among these figures--with the exception of Lowell--it is the lesser known or unknown (to the present) who are the most important to this study, who are the women writing out of their own female experience.

Marianne Moore, a major figure even today, chose scarcely

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The other six of its seven basic tenets are: to use common speech, to avoid clichés, to create new rhythms, to be concrete, to be concise, to be implicit. Cleanth Brooks, author of Modern Poetry and the Tradition (New York, 1965), feels that the moderns' break from the use of traditional poetic subjects is the first thing that can be said about modern poetry.

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In addition to Amy Lowell and H. D., Pound, Eliot, Sandberg, Williams, and Masters, for example. Because these Imagists sought an organ for the expression of their work and their theories, Harriet Monroe founded Poetry magazine in 1912; Poetry is still considered by most people to be the most prestigious poetry journal in America.

to write out of her female experience at all. H. D. wrote about female experience in such an opaque manner that it is barely recognizable. For example, her nature poems, on the surface, are about such things as small, delicate flowers wracked and torn by sea and wind but which still maintain an inherent loveliness. Some modern critics--especially women--are beginning to see in these apparently one-dimensional nature portraits another level of experience, a female one: in this case, the flowers would suggest the strength and endurance of a fragile and beautiful woman. Sara Teasdale wrote some love lyrics, but they are in the nineteenth-century manner: idealized and generalized, with lovers who are Anybody or Nobody, expressing clichéd themes such as Love Makes the World Go Around, or The Course of True Love Never Did Run Smooth. Genevieve Taggard wrote at least one early poem important to this study (see below), but the bulk of her work dealing with female experience was written after 1923. Elinor Wylie had published only one volume (in the United States) prior to 1923 (Nets to Catch the Wind: 1921); and although it contains some of her best and best remembered poems ("Wild Peaches," "Velvet Shoes"), it does not contain poems written out of her female experience. Harriet Monroe's poems about female experience, even those written after 1923, are more reflective of the nineteenth century than the twentieth. Their conventionality and sentimentality are apparent in this opening stanza of her poem "Maternity":

After the months of torpor,  
Weakness and ache and strain,  
After this day's deep drowning  
In stormy seas of pain--

To feel your hand, my baby,  
Upon my bosom lain!  
(Chosen Poems: 1935)

Among the well known figures, Amy Lowell is significant because she is one of the first of those women whose work includes basically non-sentimental and non-militant uses of domesticity in the first quarter of the twentieth century. She is also one of the many women who verbalize their awareness of their problems arising from being a woman writer. She wrote, for example: "I started . . . with one of the greatest handicaps that anyone could possibly have. I belonged to the class which is not supposed to be able to produce any creative work."<sup>64</sup>

Scattered throughout her prolific and varied body of work are poems which employ, in various ways, feminine experience. For example, she occasionally uses small, homely objects metaphorically. Her poem "A Gift" illustrates:

See! I give myself to you. Beloved!  
My words are little jars  
For you to take and put upon a shelf.  
Their shapes are quaint and beautiful,  
And they have many pleasant colours and hues  
To recommend them.  
Also the scent from them fills the room  
With sweetness of flowers and crushed grasses.

When I shall have given you the last one,  
You will have the whole of me,  
But I shall be dead.

(Sword Blades and Poppy Seeds: 1914)

Also, part of the magic of her famous "lilacs" is expressed

<sup>64</sup>

As quoted by S. Foster Damon, Amy Lowell, A Chronicle (Boston, 1935), p. 486. Also, see her poem "The Sisters" quoted in Chapter I.

in domestic terms: "You persuaded the housewife that her dish-pan was of silver/And her husband an image of pure gold" (What's O'Clock: 1925).

Among her many diverse narrative poems are several with domestic backgrounds or subjects. "The Cremona Violin" (Men, Women and Ghosts: 1916) is among the more interesting and successful of these. In this poem, a woman is married to a man who loves his music, his violin, more than he does her. She is another violin, waiting to be played. She keeps their house shining, and she knits to pass the time she must spend alone because of her husband's dedication to his music. When her husband discovers he has been lax in his attention to her, they have a passionate reunion. Then the woman again turns to her housekeeping to express herself:

Charlotta was so gay that old, dull tasks  
Were furbished up to seem like rituals.  
She baked and brewed as one who only asks  
The right to serve. Her daily manuals  
Of prayers were duties, and her festivals  
When Theodore praised some dish, or frankly said  
She had a knack for making up a bed.

But this poem does not end in the cliché terms of the nineteenth-century's happy-ever-after manner. The husband's attentions relapse; Charlotta breaks the violin and flees.

Genevieve Taggard, if not a poet of Lowell's stature, is still a fairly important figure. Of the poems she wrote before 1923, "With Child," written in 1921, is the most important. It may have been one of the first poems written by a woman that deals

explicitly and realistically with the subject of pregnancy; it contains descriptions of the mother-to-be's physical and psychological states:

Now I am slow and placid, fond of sun,  
Like a sleek beast, or a worn one,  
No slim and languid girl--not glad  
With the windy trip I once had,  
But velvet-footed, musing of my own,  
Torpido, mellow, stupid as a stone.

. . .

(Collected Poems: 1938)

And in a subsequent stanza the woman observes that she is "big  
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with this loneliness," a touching double entendre.

Margaret Widdemer and Leonora Speyer are lesser known women poets whose contribution to poetry written out of female experience was limited but nevertheless deserves mention. Of the two, Widdemer is more important for the purposes of this chapter because she had written more by 1923.

Widdemer, although basically a novelist, published three volumes of poetry before 1923: The Factories with Other Lyrics, 1915; The Old Road to Paradise, 1918; and Cross-Currents, 1921. Widdemer, as perhaps all quite prolific writers must be, is a very repetitive poet. She has few subjects, few themes. Prominent among them is the portrayal of women as martyrs to love.

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An exceptionally long poem entitled "Evening Love of Self" which Taggard worked on between 1927 and 1934 bears strong resemblances to Millay's "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" sequence. "Evening Love of Self" tells the story of a farm wife disillusioned with the "monstrous love" that ties her to her husband and their farm, a woman who silently rebels at knowing a man and being known by him too well.



But Widdemer also expresses realistic psychological insights into the relationships of women with men. In "Woman Lore" (The Old Road to Paradise) she observes, regarding the man in a woman's life: "Your child they give your arms to hold,/Your child they grow to be." And one poem, "The Modern Woman to Her Lover" (The Factories with Other Lyrics), foreshadows the Liberated Female for which Millay became famous in A Few Figs from Thistles (1920):

I shall not lie to you any more,  
Flatter or fawn to attain my end--  
I am what never has been before,  
Woman--and Friend.

I shall be strong as a man is strong,  
I shall be fair as a man is fair,  
Hand in locked hand we shall pass along  
To a purer air:

I shall not drag at your bridle-rein,  
Knee pressed to knee shall we ride the hill;  
I shall not lie to you ever again--  
Will you love me still?

Leonora Speyer published just one volume before 1923. In it, "The Ladder" is the best poem. This poem illustrates the new ways in which women (including Widdemer) began to view their relationships with men. Here the speaker is portrayed as martyring herself to the man:

I had a sudden vision in the night,  
I did not sleep, I dare not say I dreamed,--  
Beyond my bed a pallid ladder gleamed  
And lifted upward toward the sky's dim height;  
And every rung a woman's body seemed,  
Outstretched, and down the sides her long hair streamed,  
And you, you climbed that ladder of delight!  
You climbed, sure-footed, naked rung by rung,  
Clasped them and trod them, called them by their name,  
And my name too I heard you speak at last;  
You stood upon my breast the while and flung

A hand up to the next! and then--oh shame--  
I kissed the foot that bruised me as it passed.  
(A Canopic Jar: 1921)

Also little known but more important are Flanner, Hall, and Untermeyer. Millay and other of the more well known women poets of this period so completely overshadowed them that their work has been largely forgotten. The resultant loss is a significant one. Flanner wrote little, but her poems seem more successful than Widdemer's, in particular. Hall and Untermeyer are more important yet because they wrote more and because much of what they wrote is quite good.

Hildegard Flanner's slender 1920 volume Young Girl contains two poems portraying female experience that stand above the average poems of this type from the period. "Dianthus," which follows, is a feminist poem of extreme subtlety and delicacy:

They say that my grandmother often picked you  
And placed your quaint perfume  
At her tight girdle.

My grandmother  
Did Vergil into French  
And then had seven children.

. . . . I shall not pick you,  
Dianthus.

There is humor in the understated rejection of Dianthus, more commonly called Sweet William, that is very pleasing and very far removed from the usually obvious or outspoken treatments of this theme. "Discovery" tells of a young girl's discovery of her body:

Until my lamp and I  
Stood close together by the glass,  
I had not every noticed  
I was a comely lass.

My aunts have always nodded,  
"Sweet child,  
She has a gentle soul  
And mild."

And so, one night,  
I took my lamp and said  
"I'll look upon my gentle soul  
Before I go to bed,"

I could not find it; no,  
But gazing hard I spied  
Something much more near to me,  
White armed and amber-eyed.

And as I looked I seemed to feel  
Warm hands upon my breast,  
Where never any hands but mine  
Were known to rest.

And as I looked my startled thoughts  
Winged up in happy flight,  
And circled like mad butterflies  
About the light.

. . .

I went to bed without my soul--  
What difference to me?--  
I had a joyful little sin  
For company.

And that is what came of listening  
To aunts who always lied.  
They never told me that I was  
White armed and amber-eyed.

"Discovery" seems to be another forerunner of more honest and frank writing to follow. Until this time, women mostly had a surfeit of emotions but no bodies.

Hazel Hall's poetry is proof that writers can use their experience, no matter how limited, and through that experience create valuable creative works. Hall was confined to a wheel chair as a young child and never walked again. It is out of and about

her narrow world that the majority of the poems in her first volume, Curtains (1921), is constructed. <sup>66</sup> Curtains is divided into two sections. The first, "Curtains," contains poems using the things she can see from her chair, the things that lead to the wider world to which she has no access--door, window-frame, stairway--as symbols of her imprisonment. However, there is no explicit reference made to her affliction; the speaker seems representative of any person whose life is limited to a domestic situation. The second section, "Needlework," uses the experience by which she passed most of her time, sewing, as both subject and metaphor.

"Monograms" is representative of Hall's use of this experience:

I am monogramming  
Seven dozen napkins,  
With tablecloths to match,  
For a bride.

Ninety-one times my needle shall trace  
The leaf-like scrolls that interlace  
Each other; up the padded side  
Of the monogram my eye shall guide  
For ninety-one days where the stitches run;  
And every day one more is done.

She is tall and fair,  
She will be married  
In June . . . .

The linen is fine as satin is fine;  
Its shining coolness flaunts design  
Of death-white poppies, trailing ferns  
Rioting richly from Grecian urns.

66

Hall died in 1924 at age 38. Two posthumous volumes appeared in 1928: Walkers and Cry of Time.

Ghost-flowers.  
Cold, cold . . .

All these patterned splendours fade  
Before the crest my hands have made;  
In the lifeless flax my stitches cry  
With life my hands may not put by.

June . . .  
Real flowers,  
Moist and warm to touch,  
Like flesh . . .

And by and by with all the rest  
Of intimate things in her bridal-chest,  
Gentle muslins and secret lace,  
Something of mine will have a place;  
Caught in these scrolls and filigrees  
There will be that which no eye sees,  
The bulk of a season's smothered wonder,  
My ninety-one days stitched under and under.

They will be decking an altar  
With white roses,  
And lacing an aisle  
With white ribbon . . . .

Although she certainly had a real-life situation filled with sentimentality on which to draw, Hall does not exploit it. In this poem, she juxtaposes the details of the seamstress' work--the cold linen, the repetitive nature of the sewing and its long duration--with small warm details of the bride's experience--"June, real flowers . . . like flesh"--to create a poignant sense of the barrenness of the speaker's life, a life that could be representative of many women's. Hall has a great empathy with "All the tired women,/Who sewed their lives away" ("Instruction").

Metaphorically Hall creates fresh and original analogies between the seamstress' world and the world outside, the world

of nature with which she also empathizes. In "Two Sewing" she notes that

The wind is sewing with needles of rain.  
With shining needles of rain  
It stitches into the thin  
Cloth of earth . . . .

"Heavy Threads" is another example of this type of analogy:

When the dawn unfolds like a bolt of ribbon  
Thrown through my window,  
I know that hours of light  
Are about to thrust themselves into me  
Like omnivorous needles into listless cloth,  
Threaded with the heavy colours of the sun.  
They seem altogether too eager  
To embroider this thing of mine,  
My Day,  
Into the strict patterns of an altar cloth;  
Or at least to stitch it into a useful garment.  
But I know they will do nothing of the kind.  
They will prick away,  
And when they are through with it  
It will look like the patch quilt my grandmother made  
When she was learning to sew.

Hall is certainly no undiscovered or neglected Emily Dickinson--she lacks Dickinson's originality and complexity and much else besides--and yet there are similarities between the two: their reclusive lives (one enforced, the other not); their employment of their limited experience that leads to transcendence of it. Hall is a minor figure, but one deserving of some recognition. One of the most remarkable things about most of her poems is that they would be defensible, even if the circumstances of her life were not known.

Jean Starr Untermeyer is perhaps the most important of these lesser known figures in the emergence of the use of female

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experience in ways which could lead finally to superior work.  
Her June 1923 letter to the editor of The Bookman articulates the  
difficulty of women writers "chained to the routine of domestic-  
ity."<sup>68</sup> And it also shows that she chose consciously to use the  
material of that restrictive life in her work. "I do not assent  
to [the] condition that for a woman to be a successful artist she  
must cast into the discard that part of her life that is essen-  
tially womanly," she wrote.<sup>69</sup> Also, she hoped for a scientific  
discovery, such as the Pill, that would liberate a woman's sex  
life "since the sexual instinct is so bound up with the creative  
impulse."<sup>70</sup>

By 1923, Untermeyer had published two volumes of poetry:  
Growing Pains in 1918 and Dreams Out Of Darkness, 1921. Growing  
Pains contains several realistic and non-sentimental portraits of  
women. Too often Untermeyer uses these portrait poems to explicitly  
criticize society or human foibles. "Church Sociable," for  
instance, portrays "Mrs. Lee/And other members of the Ladies Aid,"  
do-gooders who turn "their Christian backs on Mrs. Cohn." But

67  
She was praised by her husband, Louis Untermeyer, as a  
good domestic poet. American Poetry Since 1900 (New York, 1923),  
p. 227.

68  
The Bookman, LVII, 480.

69  
Ibid.

70  
Ibid., p. 481.

her successful portraits are basically non-sentimental tributes to women. The poem "Birth" praises her sister's endurance of a difficult childbirth without being morbid or too sweet. "Autumn," selection from which follow, is a tribute to her mother:

. . .

There was our back-yard,  
So plain and stripped of green,  
With even the weeds carefully pulled away  
From the crooked, red bricks that made the walk.  
And the earth on either side so black.

Autumn and dead leaves burning in the sharp air.  
And winter comforts coming in like a pageant.

I shall not forget them:  
Great jars laden with the raw green of pickles,  
Standing in a solemn row across the back of the porch,  
Exhaling the pungent dill;  
And in the very center of the yard,  
You, tending the great catsup kettle of gleaming copper  
Where far, red tomatoes bobbed up and down

. . .

And enamelled crab-apples that tricked with their  
fragrance  
But were bitter to taste.  
And there were spicy plums and ill-shaped quinces,  
And long string beans floating in pans of clear water  
Like slim, green fishes.  
And there was fish itself,  
Salted, silver herring from the city . . .

And you moved among these mysteries,  
Absorbed and smiling and sure;  
Stirring, tasting, measuring,  
With the precision of a ritual.  
I like to think of you in your years of power--  
You, now so shaken and so powerless--  
High priestess of your home.

Thus, Untermeyer uses these women's female experiences to create their portraits and praises them for the way they handle these experiences.

Two poems in this book deal with Untermeyer's concern with being a woman and a poet. In "Deliverance," the speaker discovers



that marriage and childbirth do not provide "deliverance" from the things that drive her, that haunt her; and she ends by questioning whether deliverance must not instead be made from the fire of her own heart, the sword forged by her own hand. In "Medicine," the woman is crippled by those who want to reinforce her domestic side when she prefers her "work." This poem in its entirety reads:

They lay small healing to my mind,  
They who come with luke-warm poultices of praise,  
And smile a festered, green smile  
And call me clever;  
Or those that come with crippling kindness,  
Lauding my domestic wisdom.

These are not the things I strive for.  
My mind would rise from its crumpled couch.  
It has little toleration  
With the bed-side manner of friends.  
I know a potion for my pain:  
Life will brew me a tonic  
Of work--  
Work that will make me whole again,  
When I can labor with laughter.

Dreams Out Of Darkness contains many poems that use domesticity or female experience imagistically. Usually the subject of these poems is nature. The "sun-bleached spread of a hill/And sun-dyed tapestry of an apple tree" are observed in "Blue Book--Route 121." In "Glimpse in Autumn,"

. . .  
Richly brocaded trees  
. . .  
. . . stand against a wall  
Of crisp October sky,  
Their plumed heads held high,  
Like ladies at a ball.

Spring is portrayed as a bride in "April Conceit":

Can this be Spring that floats such shadowy veils?  
And what procession does she head?  
And are the showery whitened apple-trees  
The bouquets of a bride, about to be wed?

And are those dark hills standing in a row  
The black-frosted ushers in her train?  
And can it be the bride is sad this year  
And hangs back weeping? What else, then, is the rain?

In "Lullabye for a Man-Child," "The trees are bending at the knees/Like women broken by the years." And "Lake-Song" illustrates both this technique and a poetic treatment of Untermeyer's awareness of women imprisoned in their roles:

The lapping of lake water  
Is like the weeping of women,  
The weeping of ancient women  
Who grieved without rebellion.

The lake falls over the shore  
Like tears on their curven bosoms,  
Here is languid, luxurious wailing,  
The wailing of kings' daughters.

So do we ever cry,  
A soft, unmutinous crying,  
When we know ourselves each a princess  
Locked fast within her tower.

In "Sinfonia Domestica" she asks: if women frustrate all their other desires to be the good housewives that men seem to want their wives to be, will they be "that glory, that last desire/In which men struggle? Is Romance in a wife?"

In a long poem called "Eve Before the Tree," Untermeyer examines the difference between men and women in love, a common theme in this volume. In this very original description of the fall, Eve recognizes the difference in her response to love making and Adam's: for her it is an enthralling experience; for Adam,

especially after Eve becomes pregnant, the rest of the world encroaches on his consciousness. Eve eats the apple in order to learn why men and women differ in this way.

Another long work in this book is a three-part poem entitled Three Dreams. The following is the conclusion to the second part entitled "Love and Art." It deals more explicitly with Untermeyer's vision of the woman who is a wife and who longs for other means of expression than any of the poems in her first volume:

. . .  
But the voice in the shadow said:  
"This is Art.  
This is not for you."  
And again the finger pointed . . . .

I fell into a great weeping.

Unwillingly I turned and going further  
I saw chalked on a naked hoarding  
A crude sum:  
Love minus Art = Wife.  
And I followed, with withering resignation,  
To a place where I knew you waited.

As the first quarter of the twentieth century drew to a close, there was a new climate apparent in some of the poetry written by women. Lowell, Speyer, Widdemer, Flanner, Hall, Taggard, and Untermeyer are representative of this new climate. They looked at themselves and at other women more realistically and with more honesty than their predecessors. They used what they saw with more imagination and more variety. Without writing militant verse, many of them explored the same concerns that are frequently the subjects and themes of poetry written by women

today. And in all probability, they helped provide a climate which encouraged Edna St. Vincent Millay to write in her best vein--to write out of her own feminine and domestic experience.

## CHAPTER IV

### MILLAY: A REASSESSMENT

One lady poet was a nymphomaniac and wrote for Vanity  
Fair.  
(from "The Lady Poets with Foot Notes" by Ernest  
Hemingway)

Edna St. Vincent Millay is primarily remembered for her poems celebrating sexual freedoms for women and for those expressing her disillusionment with mankind. Selections from two of her sonnet sequences, Fatal Interview, and "Epitaph for the Race of Man," typify the Millay anthologized today, when she is included at all. The former is a proficient but somewhat academic exercise in the tradition of the courtly love sonnet sequence; the latter, abstract philosophising on the folly of man. Fortunately, Millay's blatantly propagandistic war poetry has been forgotten. Unfortunately, most of her domestic poetry has been forgotten as well.

Despite the high quality and frequency of her domestic poems, Millay's overall contribution to poetry written by women was considered by critics during her lifetime to be merely the creation of a literary heroine who spoke out of a new, liberated consciousness. Many of these New Women type poems are successful and interesting; but the speakers too often are not portrayed as real, individualized women. They are witty and clever and sexually emancipated; but as women they are a stereotyped abstraction. The speaker of the following sonnet, for example, is a disembodied

voice:

I, being born a woman and distressed  
By all the needs and notions of my kind,  
Am urged by your propinquity to find  
Your person fair, and feel a certain zest  
To bear your body's weight upon my breast:  
So subtly is the fume of life designed,  
To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind,  
And leave me once again undone, possessed.  
Think not for this, however, the poor treason  
Of my stout blood against my staggering brain,  
I shall remember you with love, or season  
My scorn with pity,--let me make it plain:  
I find this insufficient reason  
For conversation when we meet again.  
(The Harp-Weaver: 1923)

The impersonalized speaker works here because she is intended to represent all women: "I, being born a woman . . . ." There is no personality here. There is no environment, no dramatic interplay. There is no real man involved, only a "person fair," a "body." There is not even any particularized emotion, just generalities: a "certain zest," a "frenzy." When the speaker is stereotyped and the situation generalized in this way, identification with the speaker must be made totally on an intellectual level. Many of Millay's burning-the-candle-at-both-ends type poems are slight and repetitious, partly because they portray only a voice; and all portray the same voice. In more successful poems, however, Millay places the speakers in a setting or in a situation with which women can identify. "The Fitting" (Huntsman, What Quarry?: 1939) is such a poem. Here the speaker's body is portrayed as being impersonally handled by dressmakers, "doing what they were paid to do." As this activity proceeds, the woman thinks of her lover. The brief mention of the lover invites

comparisons between the present touch of the dressmakers and the anticipated evening with the lover, when his touch, as Norman A. Brittin notes, will not have to be paid for.<sup>71</sup>

It was these kinds of love poems--love poems declaring or illustrating women's independence in the face of social conventions--which most interested Millay's public. Many of these kinds of poems appear to be autobiographical, confessional. Therefore, as much attention was paid to guessing the identity of the lover(s) as to the poems themselves. With the appearance of this type of heroine and this kind of love poem (especially in the 1920 volume A Few Figs from Thistles), Millay began to be encouraged to write as a woman for all the wrong reasons: shock, titillation, idle speculation. "Gossip and scandal . . . enhanced her sales,"

<sup>72</sup> reports Dorothy Thompson. The fact that Fatal Interview, the fifty-two sonnet sequence published in 1931, describes an illicit affair <sup>73</sup> may help to explain that poem's lasting popularity. It seems to have survived where superior work such as the sequence "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" have not. Also, Fatal Interview was undomestic, academic, and abstract. It could, therefore, be judges as "intellectual," as "masculine"; thus, a superior work.

<sup>71</sup>  
Edna St. Vincent Millay (New York, 1967), p. 149.

<sup>72</sup>  
"The Woman Poet," Ladies Home Journal (January 1951), p. 12.

<sup>73</sup>  
The speaker says: "The scar of this encounter like a sword/Will lie between me and my troubled lord."

In addition to public interest, critical interest also has basically been limited to these types of poems. Too many critics have been interested only in debating Millay's "intellectuality," her "masculinity" or her lack of these qualities. Too many have considered Millay from only one point of view, that of ardent feminist.

In 1934, Alfred Kreymborg judged Millay's flippant Flapper persona to be her major contribution. He finds Millay "infinitely preferable to the sighing, dying ladies of Poe's era."<sup>74</sup> However, he does not particularly admire her endowment. She "set up smart standards for a brood of jackdaws to echo," he snaps.<sup>75</sup>

In 1937, Harold Lewis Cook, in his essay of appreciation of Millay which prefaces Karl Yost's bibliography, analyzes her contribution in this way: "She was being frivolous about sacred subjects, love and faithfulness and domesticity. She was saying that women could be quite as free as men, that they had in all human relationships as active a desire for expression as did men."<sup>76</sup>

Even a contemporary critic (1967) such as Norman A.

<sup>74</sup>

A History of American Poetry, New York, p. 440.

<sup>75</sup>

Ibid., p. 441.

<sup>76</sup>

Bibliography of the Works of Edna St. Vincent Millay, New York, p. 19. See also Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska, A History of American Poetry, 1900-1940 (New York, 1946), p. 274. Cook and other critics exaggerate when they assert that this voice of the liberated woman was new to poetry. Cook qualifies his assertion at the end of his essay by adding that it was new to twentieth-century American poetry. Even this, in the light of Margaret Widdemer's poem, "The Modern Woman to Her Lover," quoted in the previous chapter, is an exaggeration. And Aphra Behn and other British women had been there long before.



Brittin sums up Millay's achievement as the female poet who was "responsible for destroying the restriction upon women's . . . frankness."<sup>77</sup> James Gray (1967) acknowledges Millay's resistance to classification but basically praises her as a champion of<sup>78</sup> causes.

Thus, Millay's public, editors, and critics have been emphasizing and praising some of Millay's less successful and actually less important work and have been neglecting or ignoring work that best reveals her talent, her domestic poetry. Because she disdained a domestic role in her own life, the idea of Millay's being domestic in any way had probably not even occurred to them. It is enlightening, therefore, to review Millay's own personal concerns with domestic life before turning to her domestic<sup>79</sup> poetry.

Millay was one of a number of bright, young women who converged on New York City and the capitals of Europe in the early 1920's to pursue the new liberated life women felt they had won along with suffrage. By this time, Millay was a published and

<sup>77</sup>  
Brittin, p. 166.

<sup>78</sup>  
Edna St. Vincent Millay, Minneapolis.

<sup>79</sup>  
As those familiar with Millay's career know, she was a versatile writer, composing a variety of works in addition to her volumes of poems. She wrote prose satires under the pseudonym Nancy Boyd which were published in Ainslee's magazine and in Vanity Fair (and many of which are collected in Distressing Dialogues, New York, 1924). Under her own name she also wrote several short plays, the libretto for an opera, a long, unusual poem called Conversations at Midnight, war propaganda, and short stories. The backgrounds and in many cases, the central situations of most of these works are also domestic.

recognized poet; and, for a while, she undertook a simultaneous career as an actress. During this time, she half-heartedly agreed to marry two or three of her numerous suitors; meanwhile she practiced her belief in free love. She had stirred the literary world at a relatively early age, and she stirred the hearts of many men long after most women her age were married. One reason she could not commit herself to an early marriage was her fear that domesticity would kill her creative voice. Floyd Dell, one of her rejected suitors in the 1920's, recalls "that she was probably afraid that by becoming a wife and mother, she might be less the poet. She wanted to devote herself exclusively to her poetry and did not want to 'belong' to anyone except herself.

She did not want to spend her energies on domestic affairs." <sup>80</sup>

A rather turgid sonnet she wrote at this time makes perfectly clear her rejection of human love for the sake of poetry:

Cherish you then the hope I shall forget  
At length, my lord, Pieria?--put away  
For your so passing sake, this mouth of clay,  
These mortal bones against my body set,  
For all the puny fever and frail sweat  
Of human love,--renounce for these, I say,  
The Singing Mountain's memory, and betray  
The silent lyre that hangs upon me yet?  
Ah, but indeed, some day shall you awake,  
Rather, from dreams of me, that at your side  
So many nights, a lover and a bride,  
But stern in my soul's chastity, have lain,  
To walk the world forever for my sake,  
And in each chamber find me gone again!

(Second April: 1921)

In spite of these fears of a conflict between marriage and career, Millay did marry. She was thirty-one when, in 1923,

she married Eugen Boissevain, a man twelve years her senior. He gave up his career in order to take up the household duties and thus free his "child" for her writing. When Allan Ross Macdougall interviewed Boissevain for an article in the Delineator some years after the marriage, Boissevain recalled: "When we got married I gave up my business. It seemed advisable to arrange our lives to suit Vincent. It is so obvious to anyone that Vincent is more important than I am. Anyone can buy and sell coffee--which is what I did . . . . But anyone cannot write poetry."<sup>81</sup>

With a husband such as Boissevain, Millay undoubtedly had few fears that she would be smothered intellectually or creatively. Nevertheless, she published a poem in the year of her marriage that warns a husband what may happen if he scorns his wife's intellect and insists instead on subjugating her to stereotyped wifely roles--to being submissive, non-intellectual, and vain:

Oh, oh, you will be sorry for that word!  
Give back my book and take my kiss instead.  
Was it my enemy or my friend I heard,  
"What a big book for such a little head!"  
Come, I will show you now my newest hat,  
And you may watch me purse my mouth and prink!  
Oh, I shall love you still, and all of that.  
I never again shall tell you what I think.  
I shall be sweet and crafty, soft and sly;  
You will not catch me reading any more:  
I shall be called a wife to pattern by;  
And some day when you knock and push the door,  
Some sane day, not too bright and not too stormy  
I shall be gone, and you may whistle for me.  
(The Harp-Weaver: 1923)

Perhaps because Millay was so aware of the potential threat to her career posed by her marriage and certainly because

of her husband's willingness to accept an unorthodox domestic situation, the marriage endured until Boissevain's death twenty-six years later.

Although some of Millay's domestic poems seem clearly autobiographical, it is difficult to discern any over-all correlation between the events of her life and the periods when she wrote on domestic subjects. She alternates between writing some domestic poems and writing none at all, but for no apparent reasons. She wrote about marriage before she became a wife, culminating in the fine sequence "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree." After her marriage, domesticity virtually disappeared from her work until the 1939 volume Huntsman, What Quarry?, a rather strange mixture of war and domestic concerns. During the war years, propaganda held her captive; but the poems collected posthumously in 1954 in Mine the Harvest reveal that she ultimately returned to her more basic subjects: nostalgia for childhood, nature, and, most importantly, domesticity. Thus, it is more useful and enlightening to see her domestic poetry not in terms of chronological progression, but in terms of certain recurrent themes.

The same domestic themes run through all three of the periods of Millay's career in which she wrote about her own or other women's experiences. Her "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" sequence (see Appendix for the complete sequence) deals with one of the most common: the relationship between husband and wife. This sequence appeared in the May 1923 issue of Harpers before they were collected in The Harp-Weaver volume. Millay did not

marry until August 30th of that year. Thus, the poems were written before she herself could have had any actual experience as a wife. This fact makes them all the more remarkable since they are one of the most striking portraits of a wife's situation in twentieth-century American poetry.

These sonnets tell the story of a wife who returns to the deathbed of her estranged husband. <sup>82</sup> The wife Millay creates or describes here is a woman whose body has trapped her into marriage with a man she knows to be her intellectual and spiritual inferior. The woman was aware that her husband was "not over-kind nor over-quick in study/Nor skilled in sports nor beautiful" when she met him in school, but she married him anyway. Apparently even his physical passion did not prove to be a match for hers. In Sonnet IV, the woman's "desolate wish for comfort" and her intense efforts at starting a fire among "the sleeping ashes" seem a metaphorical experience suggesting the woman's frustrated efforts to kindle a physical passion in her past marital relationship. The woman is "mindful of like passion hurled in vain/Upon a similar task in other days." She brings her whole body to bear upon the "hilt" of the coals.

The woman's story is told primarily through such small domestic actions, rather than through explicit statements. We are told that the man does not measure up to the woman's dreams,

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According to Jean Gould, this was a true story told to Millay by her mother. The Poet and Her Book (New York, 1969), p. 132.

that she married him because she was "so in need." But we are not told explicitly how their previous life together progressed or why they separated. What we are given are subtle insights into the woman's character and flashes of what her life in the house once was. Thus, we see her in Sonnet I in the past, presumably a new wife, "big-aproned, blithe, with stiff blue sleeves . . . plant[ing] seeds, musing ahead to their far blossoming." There is something promising and maternal in this picture of the woman planning ahead to a distant crop. In contrast are the geraniums, the "rotted stalks" of the present. She has not provided the necessary care to ensure that her plants survive the winter season. She abandoned them when she left her husband.

Sonnet I provides a further contrast with the woman's actions later in the sequence. Her figure "big-aproned" and "blithe" in a past spring is contrasted to her discovery in Sonnet XI of an apron which she had lost in a long ago snowstorm. Finding the apron, she is struck "that here was spring, and the whole year to be lived through once more." It is as if the resurrection of the apron represents not a new year at all, but only the same year to be lived again. In fact, none of the promise of the image of the woman from her past is fulfilled. She comes back only to mother her dying husband and to muse, in the end, upon his corpse.

These poems do not reveal what has motivated the woman to return to care for her dying husband. Perhaps it is a sense of guilt or perhaps a sense of duty. Certainly it is not love that

has brought her. Her behavior, her desire to remain invisible to the eyes of the neighbors, suggests guilt. Her instinct is always to flee. She leaves only the fanning of a rocker to the eyes of the grocer, just as the small bird she thinks she may have seen has left only his flash among the dwarf nasturiums (shades of Emily Dickinson!). And the train's whistle at night brings her magic visions of cities that call to her as the whistle must have done when she first lived with the man as his wife.

The woman immerses herself in housekeeping as a distraction from her dying husband's "ever-clamorous care." She discovers that there is a "rapture of a decent kind,/In making mean and ugly objects fair." (It is to this kind of rapture that her desires have come.) She polishes the kitchen utensils, changes shelf paper, and replaces the table's oilcloth; but she is now only a visitor to the kitchen that once was hers. She has not been the one to position the soda and sugar; thus, they seem strange to her.

It is unclear whether or not the woman views domestic chores as a part of the trap of marriage. Perhaps it is only her disillusionment with the man and not her functions in the house which have caused the estrangement. The clean kitchen seems to give her pleasure; but, on the other hand, she finds saving the string and paper from the groceries a routine that is "treacherously dear" and "dull." And this is a woman who needs magic in her life, a woman for whom the common and everyday must be transformed.

As a girl she was blinded by a reflected light in a mirror held by the boyfriend, not by the vision of the boy himself. When

it occurs to her that his dazzling her with a mirror is unmiraculous, she still persists in viewing him by moonlight rather than by the clear and truthful light of day. The unsuccessful outcome of her marriage has not disillusioned the woman in general; she is still affected by the magic of the train's whistle. However, in matters concerning her husband, she has given up hope of magic or surprise. She anticipates that in death he will be "only dead." But there is irony here. In Sonnet XVII, the last and perhaps the finest of the sequence, the woman is surprised by her dead husband. Considering him as "familiar as the bedroom door," she is surprised to discover in him a new dimension. In death he has a mystery about him that, in life, he had long since lost, or that she had only pretended was his.

Unlike Amy Lowell's domestic narratives which are pot-boilers, these sonnets are serious, quiet, very delicate pieces of work. Except for the epiphany in the final poem, the grand emotions of these characters are over. But the work is not slight or trivial. Much of Millay's work is uneven; however, except for the weak concluding couplet to IX, this sequence is extremely well-written. Also, the sequence reveals a remarkable degree of imagination and insight into the female condition. Even though the essence of the story is said to be true and even though Millay had done some housekeeping as the eldest daughter of a divorced and working mother, her understanding of the woman's emotional responses toward her husband, especially the epiphany in the concluding sonnet, is unaccounted for by what we know of her actual experience.



But the excellence and the significance of these sonnets went unnoticed or unrewarded by Millay's contemporaries. In fact, in a 1924 review of The Harp-Weaver volume, Witter Bynner, a fellow poet and one-time suitor of Millay, condemned them as vastly inferior to the rest of the book. He detected in the sonnet sequence, he says, "signs of fabrication" and a new note<sup>83</sup> of ill-health."

Whenever Millay writes about marriage, it is usually in the sad tone of "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree," or in a disillusioned or cynical tone. A person is trapped biologically into marriage, or, like the husband in "On the Wide Heath" (Wine from These Grapes: 1934), trapped out of loneliness. This husband goes home "to a kitchen of a loud shrew" and

Home to a worn reproach, the disagreeing,  
The shelter, the stale air, content to be  
Pecked at, confined, encroached upon,--it being  
Too lonely, to be free.

Also, the married person is one who resists being totally possessed. The speaker of "Truck-Garden-Market Day" (Mine the Harvest: 1954), for example, is happy to remain at home while her husband takes the produce to town because solitude gives her relief from his "noises." The time she is left alone represents to her the small part of herself she keeps from giving to him. She has already given him so much: "More than my heart to him I gave,"

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"Edna St. Vincent Millay," New Republic, December 10, p. 15. Belated appreciation is revealed, however, by James Gray in his 1967 pamphlet. Gray makes passing reference in a positive way to her association between "enormous plight" and "commonplace remedy" and cites the fallen apron poem as example. Gray, p. 28.

she says, "who now am the timid, laughed-at slave." But she must not allow him to see how she feels, because:

He would be troubled; he could not learn  
How small a part of myself I keep  
To smell the meadows, or sun the churn,  
When he's at market, or while he's asleep.

The woman is portrayed as preferring even a small housekeeping chore to the man's company. The woman's experience is different from her husband's, but by choice; and it is not necessarily inferior.

Perhaps Millay's most successful poem about marriage is one which is titled "An Ancient Gesture":

I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my  
apron:  
Penelope did this too.  
And more than once: you can't keep weaving all day  
And undoing it all through the night;  
Your arms get tired, and the back of your neck gets  
tight;  
And along towards morning, when you think it will  
never be light,  
And your husband has been gone, and you don't know  
where, for years,  
Suddenly you burst into tears;  
There is simply nothing else to do.

And I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my  
apron:  
This is an ancient gesture, authentic, antique,  
In the very best tradition, classic, Greek;  
Ulysses did this too.  
But only as a gesture,--a gesture which implied  
To the assembled throng that he was much too moved to  
speak.  
He learned it from Penelope . . .  
Penelope, who really cried.  
(Mine the Harvest: 1954)

This combining of the classic and the homely is surprising but perfectly appropriate. The poem expresses the universality of domestic experience for women as well as the differences in the

nature of experience between women and men: Penelope, the stay-at-home, the weaver, contrasted with Ulysses, the venturer, adventurer, orator. Penelope's weaving, which according to the myth, never gets done, is a perfect symbol for woman's condition. Ulysses learns something from his wife but then uses it superficially, to further his own ends. The sincerity and suffering of the woman are contrasted effectively with the political expediency of the man.

"Menses" (Huntsman, What Quarry?: 1939) is another poem that deals with marriage and with the differences between the sexes; but, more importantly, it represents Millay's frank handling of female concerns which possibly broached a subject new to poetry. Almost thirty years after the publication of "Menses," Anne Sexton published a poem called "Menstruation at Forty" in her Pulitzer winning collection Live or Die. Sexton's poem was then hailed as a breakthrough in female honesty and Sexton as a pioneer rebelling against old taboos. How quickly precedents are forgotten.

The subject of menstruation is used for different effects by Millay and Sexton. Sexton uses it to reveal poignantly an aging woman's disappointment over her failure to bear a son; Millay uses it to show how a woman's moods and emotions are at the mercy of her body and to show the resulting strain on a marriage. The speaker of "Menses" is a man; as Jean Gould asserts, he almost  
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certainly represents Eugen Boissevain. Although the man humors

the woman in a patronizing way, it is done lovingly. Even when the woman's attack on the man is brutal, he is capable of forgiveness, of thinking to himself merely that she is "unwell."

(She says at one point: "Lord, the shame,/The crying shame of seeing a man no wiser than the beasts he feeds--/His skull as empty as a shell!") The poem ends with the woman's denunciation of her own weakness: "Just heaven consign and damn/To tedious Hell," she says, "this body with its muddy feet in my mind!" Thus, it seems that the woman is as much or more concerned with the effect of her affliction on her intellect as with its effect on her relationship with the man.

The relationships between men and women and the differences between the sexes are thematically important to Millay's work. Maternity as subject or theme concerns her much less, although "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver," the poem for which she won the Pulitzer Prize, tells the story of a mother's sacrifice for her child. The speaker of this ballad is a small boy. His widowed mother is having a difficult time supporting him, feeding and clothing him. The mother possesses a strange harp, one decorated with the head of a woman. The night before Christmas the mother plays the harp, which produces not music but clothes as if it were some magic loom. In the morning, the boy finds these "clothes of a king's son"; and he finds his mother is dead. This sentimental ballad is considered by many critics to be a tribute to Millay's mother, who in many ways had sacrificed her-

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self for her children. The Harp-Weaver volume in which this poem was included in 1923 is dedicated to Mrs. Millay. But there is evidence in Millay's letters that the poet fantasized about having a son. In 1921 she had written a letter to her mother saying: "I have a curious feeling that someday I shall marry, and have a son; and that my husband will die; and that you and I and my little boy will all live together on a farm." <sup>86</sup> The mother of the poem, then, may be some imaginative blend of her mother and of herself, who sacrifices herself, through the instrument of her artistic creativity, to a child. This blend may not have been perceived, of course, by the poet herself.

Millay had no children; but in other of her poems, she oddly enough envisions herself (or her speakers) in strangely intense, maternal relationships with nature. Sometimes these visions are so bizarre as to be embarrassing. In the apocalyptic poem "The Blue-Flag in the Bog" (Second April: 1921), she adopts a maternal posture toward the last flower left on earth. In "The Little Hill" (also Second April), she pictures herself as the mother of the hill where Christ died. Worse is a poem called

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Norman A. Brittin is one critic who thinks this. He is less impressed by "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver" than the Pulitzer committee, and his patronizing criticism degrades anyone who would find the poem attractive. Brittin writes: "Perhaps the pathetic subject and the nursery-rhyme tone . . . make it a poem to be enjoyed primarily by women." (p. 116.) It is my opinion that the committee made a poor selection from Millay's work.

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Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay, ed. Allan Ross Macdougall (New York, 1952), p. 131.

"The Fledgling" (Wine from These Grapes: 1934) in which she speaks as a mother bird who brings food to her baby and cleans away its excrement.

But these conceits are mere oddities. Millay could and did write successfully about children. In an untitled poem in which she identifies with a child rather than with its mother, she deals with an adult's perception of birth as a betrayal. The second half reads:

If you wish to witness a human countenance contorted  
And convulsed and crumpled by helpless grief and  
despair,  
Then stand beside the slatted crib and say There,  
there, and take the toy away.

Pink and pale-blue look well  
In a nursery. And for the most part Baby is really  
good:  
He gurgles, he whimpers, he tries to get his toe to his  
mouth; he slobbers his food  
Dreamily--cereals and vegetable juices--onto his bib:  
He behaves as he should.

But do not for a moment believe he has forgotten  
Blackness; nor the deep  
Easy swell; nor his thwarted  
Design to remain for ever there;  
Nor the crimson betrayal of his birth into a yellow  
glare.  
The picture painted on the inner eyelids of infants  
just before they sleep  
Are not pastel.

(Mine the Harvest: 1954)

The sentiment almost inherent in this subject--darling baby in his pretty crib--is played off effectively against the strong ending of the poem. Replacing the child's toy, which to the child is merely incomprehensible loss, signifies the incomprehensible losses and terrors life holds. The child still recalls the "betrayal" of his birth; and thus his dreams are not, as we might sentimentally like

to believe, "pastel."

Another major theme, although not a familial one, is the preference of nature over housekeeping. One early (1920) and  
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apparently autobiographical poem entitled "Portrait by a Neighbor" describes this preference. The poem begins:

Before she has her floor swept  
Or her dishes done  
Any day you'll find her  
A-sunning in the sun!  
(A Few Figs from Thistles)

And the same subject is more effectively treated in a late (1954), untitled poem in which the speaker recalls the discovery of nature's beauty and wonders how as a mere child she could have withstood "the shock/Of beauty seen, noticed, for the first time." The speaker, now adult, still is staggered by the experience of encountering natural beauty--to the extent that she finds it impossible to turn from it to mundane, domestic chores:

. . .  
How did I bear it?--Now--grown up and encased  
In the armour of custom, after years  
Of looking at loveliness, forewarned  
And face to face, and no time  
And too prudent  
At six in the morning to accept the unendurable  
embrace,

I come back from the garden into the kitchen,  
And take off my rubbers--the dew  
Is heavy and high, wetting the sock above  
The shoe--but I cannot do  
The housework yet.  
(Mine the Harvest)

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Norman A. Brittin suggests Millay is the "she" of this poem. (P. 81.)

"Cave Canem" (also Mine the Harvest), another seemingly autobiographical poem (probably written after the death of her husband, who had protected her from daily distractions) reveals her preference for nature. This poem also reveals a continued concern over the encroachment of domesticity on her writing. In this lyric, the speaker complains that she must "throw bright time to chickens in an untidy yard"; and that she is "forced to sit while the potted roses wilt in the case or the/sonnet cools."

In "The Plaid Dress" (Huntsman, What Quarry?: 1939), Millay uses something feminine in much the same way that Edward Taylor used the homely and commonplace as an emblem through which to treat larger concerns:

Strong sun, that bleach [sic]  
The curtains of my room, can you not render  
Colourless this dress I wear?--  
This violent plaid  
Of purple angers and red shames; the yellow stripe  
Of thin but valid treacheries; the flashy green of  
kind deeds done  
Through indolence, high judgments given in haste;  
The recurring checker of the serious breach of taste?

No more uncoloured than unmade,  
I fear, can be this garment that I may not doff;  
Confession does not strip it off,  
To send me homeward eased and bare;

All through the formal, unoffending evening, under the  
clean  
Bright hair,  
Lining the subtle gown . . . it is not seen,  
But it is there.

The speaker's violently-colored dress is used as a metaphor to represent her emotions, her "purple angers and red shames." She can suppress these, but she cannot purge them from her personality.

Millay's letters to her editors show her opinions about



some of her work. They indicate that she preferred poems such as "The Plaid Dress" to what she called her more "modern" poems, poems of "the revolutionary element" concerning "the world outside myself today."<sup>88</sup> It is revealing that she felt it necessary to defend her more personal, feminine poems, almost to apologize for them. The reason for her defensive attitude undoubtedly lies in the critical reception to her work.

Of course Millay's feminist verse is important. It was popular with the public and helped gain her fame, and it was widely imitated by Dorothy Parker and other women poets of the period. But a reassessment of Millay suggests that her real value and achievement have been in the poems she wrote out of her own experience as a woman and out of her understanding of that experience on the part of other women. There is in her work a body of domestic poems that wears much better than her more strident and popular feminist poems.

## CHAPTER V

### DOMESTIC EXPERIENCE IN RECENT AMERICAN POETRY:

#### AS SUBJECT AND METAPHOR

The poem of the mind in the act of finding  
What will suffice. It has not always had  
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what  
Was in the script.

Then the theatre was changed  
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.  
It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.  
It has to face the men of the time and to meet  
The women of the time. It has to think about war  
And it has to find what will suffice. It has  
To construct a new stage . . .

. . . .  
It must  
Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may  
Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman  
Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.  
(from "On Modern Poetry" by Wallace Stevens)

To some extent, women poets in the twentieth century have not been encouraged to find new subjects or to deal with traditional ones in realistic and non-sentimental ways. They have not been encouraged to break out of the role of upholder of domestic bliss and uplifter of society. For example, poems in a 1937 anthology are arranged under such headings as: American Scene, Closer to Home, Social Vision, To Lovers of Birds and Beasts, To Lovers of Gardens and Trees, Poems of Faith, Around the Calendar, and For Young Readers. The editor of this anthology proudly

points out in the introduction that "in the Garden and Tree section will be found selections suitable for Arbor Day and Garden Club programs, while the section containing the poems of conviction will give verbal ammunition to pacifists and good citizens." This format insidiously reinforces women as versifiers and propagandists. As recently as 1968, an anthology of women poets was divided into categories that include: Country Matters, Aspects of Love, Nocturnes and Meditations, and Laughter and Music.<sup>90</sup>

In spite of such editing practices, women have continued to branch out. This chapter will illustrate the increasingly wider variety of subjects and tones of recent female domestic poets.

#### Husbands and Lovers

Today's poems about marriage or male/female relationships are very likely to be hostile, although some are humorous in a despairing kind of way. Occasionally these relationships are celebrated, but these are often purely sexual rather than marital ones. Often hostility is expressed in terms of a woman's domestic role. Louise Glück's "The Edge" is an example:

Time and again, time and again I tie  
My heart to that headboard  
While my quilted cries  
Harden against his hand. He's bored--  
I see it. Don't I lick his bribes, set his bouquets  
In water? Over Mother's lace I watch him drive into  
the gored  
Roasts, deal slivers in his mercy . . . I can feel  
his thighs  
Against me for the children's sake. Reward?

Mornings, crippled with this house,  
I see him toast his toast and test  
His coffee, hedgingly. The waste's my breakfast.  
(The Young American Poets, an anthology: 1968)

"Mother's lace" is a nice touch. It brings the woman's parents into the picture, suggesting they had a similar experience over an identical table, suggesting this is the way marriage is.

Sandra Hochman's "Ivory and Horn," part of which follows, is another example of hostility expressed in terms of the woman's role:

I am locked in the kitchen, let me out.  
Burning in the toaster,  
Sizzling in the pan,  
Choked in the gas range,  
Iced in the kitchen glass,  
Broken in the bowl,  
I jump out of the cup.  
Throw dishrags over my anger,  
Crumbs over my head, anoint  
Me for the marriage bed.  
The bride is buttered, eaten when she's charred.  
Her tiger falls into a tub of lard.  
(Manhattan Pastures: 1963)

The woman's sense of her own martyrdom is also vividly portrayed here.

"The Husband" by Barbara L. Greenberg illustrates a wife's fear through her identification with a cat:

He'd never wrung the  
neck of a rabbit, a  
goose or a sparrow, not  
any until  
in the night  
with a cat  
at the back of the cellar  
he strangled and strangled.

But why? said his wife  
with the chill on her nipples  
and fur in her mouth  
and the cat eyes staring.  
Why did you bring it  
why bring it to me?

And the thousands of cats  
were the jaws of her question, they  
mewed up the night from their  
thousands of fences.

(Quickly Aging Here, an anthology: 1969)

Many women poets make such an analogy between women and cats, suggesting not only that women are physically vulnerable, but also that they are decorative rather than useful, capable of inspiring instinctive and unrational dislike, and, of course, that they are catty.

Judith Viorst's book It's Hard to Be Hip Over Thirty and Other Tragedies of Married Life (1968) treats marriage in humorous verse, but with unmistakable disillusionment. In "The Honeymoon Is Over," she writes:

. . .  
The honeymoon is over  
And we find that dining by candlelight makes us squint,  
And that all the time  
I was letting him borrow my comb and hang up his wet  
raincoat in my closet,  
I was really waiting  
To stop letting him.  
And that all the time  
He was saying how he loved my chicken pot pie,  
He was really waiting  
To stop eating it  
. . .

Joyce Carol Oates, who specializes in different points of view in her poetry, has written a poem ("A Married Woman's Song," part two of "Five Confessions") from the point of view of a second wife. Even this speaker is disillusioned, saying in part:

I thought I could shovel out  
The debris of this flat, and civilize  
This man. I thought lot.  
It's vats of garbage I've got  
  
To get rid of, maybe dump surreptitiously  
in someone's unwatched lot.  
I need help. Marriage auspiciously

Drapes you in white, and then  
rapes you with hung  
Bodies of broken birds. . . .  
. . . .  
The law makes no provision  
For bodies of previous wives  
this common husband has brought

Me in sleep . . . .  
(Anonymous Sins and Other Poems: 1969)

Some contemporary women have found ways to disguise their  
antagonism to men in their poetry. They write poems that on the  
surface appear to be about nature but which really use nature as a

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metaphor. Hildegarde Flanner's poem "Never Ask Why" illus-  
trates:

Doe will die red, she will be killed some night,  
Doe will scream out, weep red, and the ferns bleed  
Deer's blood and the pink bubbles float  
Light on the lovely waters of the pool.  
Bearing no hot horn for defense, the doe must bleed  
(Being gentle meat, being the mountain's fool)  
Her life away, and on her tragic flesh  
Her enemy eat brutal until dawn.  
Thus the wailing doe. Thus the riding lion,  
Fiend on the soft loin of the wailing doe.  
Never ask why, between dark hunger  
And the last bloody sob of terror poured  
On dust, never ask why this thing is so.  
Always the fetid fury of the lion,  
Always the lost, on lillies-feeding doe.  
(If There Is Time: 1942)

On the surface a poem about cruelty in nature, this poem provides,  
on another level, a metaphor expressing rage and sorrow for the  
helpless condition of women, for the use of them as sexual  
objects. The doe bears "no hot horn." She is "gentle meat."  
"The riding lion" feeds on her "soft loin." Flanner has written  
other poems using this technique which more obviously reveal that

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H.D.'s metaphorical use of nature may have inspired this  
technique. May Swenson also employs it for other purposes.

she intends the reader to take these poems as metaphors, to equate the wild creature's behavior with man's.

As noted, many of these poems from the point of view of disillusioned wives also express disenchantment with the woman's housekeeping role. Some, however, find love makes the domestic drudgery worthwhile; a few even celebrate love and housekeeping.

Helen Chasin suggests in "Among the Supermarket" that love for a man can transcend the kinds of chores women must attend to in order to keep a household going:

Dearest, this abundance of tinned goods,  
quick-frozen gourmet snacks, V-8 juice, plasti-  
paks, imported tidbits in foreign grease,  
megatons of detergent power  
and jars of cloudy premixed cocktails  
undoes me: instantly  
I am kin to the national idiot  
agency men count on: transfixed by canned music,  
astonished in the aisles, dumbly convinced of  
happiness, crazy to make meals  
like making love.

My dear, it is not merely persuasion; not  
coming to terms with all varieties,  
each with its own use; not, stunned by choice,  
compulsion to cram the cart, consuming until  
even Brand X is familiar

but that I can still say, amid this ridiculous  
array of food and ancillaries, displayed with super-  
lunatic logic  
the bounty of days and households is manifest.  
Surrounded by these necessities, these  
trivia, I find: love is possible. We could live  
among its items. These found objects are its signs.

(Coming Close: 1968)

Nikki Giovanni, a black poet, has written a poem entitled "My House" (from her book of that name, 1972) in which the speaker praises both her man and her domestic role:

. . .

i mean it's my house  
and i want to fry pork chops  
and bake sweet potatoes  
and call them yams  
cause i run the kitchen  
and i can stand the heat

i spent all winter in  
carpet stores gathering  
patches so i could make  
a quilt

. . .

i mean i want to keep you  
warm

. . .

i'm saying it's my house  
and i'll make fudge and call  
it love and touch my lips  
to the chocolate warmth

. . .

and this is my house and you make me  
happy  
so this is your poem

Judith Kumin's point of view in "Bread" is another delightful example of a woman satisfied with her roles:

Making bread is like making love.  
The housekeeping of it takes

me in. I like the floury apron  
costume as well as I like

our skin selves, sly in bed.  
It rises the way you rise,

slow and hunchbacked, spread  
out in the loaf pan like

a fat turtle. It doubles in size.  
I punch it down, kneading

the milky dough, rolling it over  
the way you roll over on your

flat back. We feed ourselves,  
mouths wide as teapot spouts,



selfish as crows. The bread  
covers itself over and over

in the oven like a smooth sheet,  
feeding children, our children

the children we can't make yet.  
In the kitchen, I make bread.  
(Mademoiselle: August 1970)

Probably because it is extremely difficult to avoid sentimentality when writing about a dead or dying loved one, most moderns avoid it. Margaret E. Bruner's "A Pair of Gloves" is a moderately successful sonnet on the subject, however; and it does describe a "life together" that the woman remembers as happy and satisfying:

I found them in the pocket of your coat:  
The gloves you wore a few brief years ago;  
And suddenly a lump came in my throat--  
They looked so like you . . . how were you to know  
When your hand placed them there, that some day I  
Would find these empty symbols of the past,  
And in my heart would question--wonder why  
Material things had power to outlast  
The glad companionship that gave life zest:  
Our life together all too quickly fled . . .  
And yet, the contour of these gloves expressed  
A mood by which my heart was comforted--  
It seemed that you were trying to convey  
A word of hope in some strange, silent way.  
(The National League of American Pen Women's Anthology: 1951)

But disillusionment and hostility are the predominant tones in current poems about domestic relationships. And disillusionment may extend even to extra- or pre-marital affairs, as Adrienne Rich notes in her poem "Living in Sin":

She had thought the studio would keep itself;  
No dust upon the furniture of love,  
Half heresy, to wish the taps less vocal,  
The panes relieved of grime. A plate of pears,  
A piano with a Persian shawl, a cat

Stalking the picturesque amusing mouse  
Had been her vision when he pleaded "Come."  
Not that at five each separate stair would writhe  
Under the milkman's tramp; that morning light  
So coldly would delineate the scraps  
Of last night's cheese and blank sepulchral bottles;  
That on the kitchen shelf among the saucers  
A pair of beetle-eyes would fix her own--  
Envoy from some black village in the mouldings . . .  
Meanwhile her night's companion, with a yawn  
Sounded a dozen notes upon the keyboard,  
Declared it out of tune, inspected whistling  
A twelve hours' beard, went out for cigarettes;  
While she, contending with a woman's demons,  
Pulled back the sheets and made the bed and found  
A fallen towel to dust the table-top,  
And wondered how it was a man could wake  
From night to day and take the day for granted.  
By evening she was back in love again,  
Though not so wholly but throughout the night  
She woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming  
Like a relentless milkman up the stairs.

(The Diamond Cutters: 1952)

Again, it is partly through the woman's domestic role that the difference in the man and woman's natures and the woman's disillusionment are expressed. Her romantic image of pears perfect as still-life pictures, Persian shawls, and amusing mice is shattered by the reality of dirty dishes, dust, and cockroaches.

Thus, for most women the role of housekeeper impinges on that of wife or even, as in "Living in Sin," with that of lover.

### Fertility

Mona Van Duyn, a National Book Award winning poet, has written that "if . . . the female sensibility in a situation is really different from that of a man, or the woman is familiar with an aspect of life that man less frequently encounters, one would expect her to seize upon that difference and use it; what poet

would reject the chance for originality?" Pregnancy and all conditions of female sexuality related to childbearing would seem to be natural topics for female writers, then, since these subjects afford this kind of originality. And, in fact, these topics, plus mother/child relationships, are frequently explored by contemporary women poets.

Ruth Whitman's poem "Birth Day" is one example. The mother-to-be addresses the fetus:

Tenant of the terrapin,  
will you go your way, I mine?

If I do a lumbering waltz,  
and bank you like an airplane--

if the sides of your tank  
tip and bank,

hang on. Don't complain.  
If I wake before you do,

and catch your elbow in my side,  
if I rise while you lie,

you can deter me if you try:  
but I will launch you into space

some sudden horizontal  
Atlantic afternoon,

and you will swim from your fishless bowl,  
find the stars in your faceless sky,

And be my moon.

(Blood and Milk Poems: 1963)

This poem humorously ascribes the usual complaints of the pregnant woman (that the child she carries makes her clumsy, that it wakes her) to the fetus. Also, the role of who determines the actual birth process has been reversed. Here the mother, almost as a

threat or some mild kind of punishment, speaks as if she will be the initiator of the event, even if the child prefers the womb.

Joyce Carol Oates's poem "Foetal Song" describes some of the same sensations but from the point of view of the fetus:

The vehicle gives a lurch but seems  
to know its destination.  
In here, antique darkness. . . .

. . .  
Where is she off to now?--in high heels.  
I don't like the jiggle of high heels.

. . .  
Now we are in bed.  
Her heart breathes quiet and I drink blood.  
I am juicy and sweet and coiled.

. . .  
Jokes and unjokes, married couple,  
they clutch each other in water  
I feel him nudge me but it is by accident.

. . .  
She and he, months ago, decided not to kill me.

. . .  
I am grateful.  
I am waiting for my turn.

(Anonymous Sins)

The fetus seems to be looking forward to birth; but in spite of the fact that it is grateful, there is something ominous in its final statement.

In "Looking for the Uninvited," Betty Adcock's speaker addresses not an unborn fetus but an unfertilized egg. This poem, handled with a light touch similar to Whitman's in "Birth Day," concludes:

What shape would you have taken,  
you with the millions of possible  
noses, you no one,  
Jack of all minds in my trade  
unlived son?

(Southern Poetry Review, Special Issue: 1972)

This speaker, obviously, has ruled out the possibility of a

pregnancy.

Psychologically, it is often the element of chance involved in conception that is considered. It is the anxiety of not knowing and the woman's helplessness which is portrayed--whether the pregnancy is a wanted one or not. The following lines from Barbara Howes's poem "Danae" rather explicitly illustrate these concerns:

All things come to their pinnacle  
Though landscapes shift,  
Women sit in the balance, as  
Upon a knife;  
Irony cuts to the quick--is this  
Life or new life?

They sit their years out on a scale,  
The heavy yoke  
Of their heavy stomachs grounding them--  
Or else come back  
To barrenness with each full moon;  
Minds go slack

Longing or dreading, that a new  
Form will take shape.

(Light and Dark: 1959)

Sometimes women's mixed feelings about maternity are revealed as in these lines from May Swenson's poem "Mortal Surge": "We shudder to beget with child/We shudder not to beget with child" (To Mix With Time: 1963)

Women frequently portray themselves as martyrs to their children as well as to their men. The capacity for childbirth may be seen as a curse or as a blessing, or, somehow, something of both. Also, other aspects of pregnancy are now explored by female poets. Oates has written a poem entitled "Unborn Child" (Anonymous Sins) about abortion; Sandra Hochman describes what was apparently her own abortion in "How We Get Rid of Our Childhood"

(The Vaudeville Marriage: 1966). But these poems about abortion are not as interesting as those by Gwendolyn Brooks and Anne Sexton which are discussed in Chapter VII.

A related subject is barrenness. Carol Berge creates an interesting portrait of "The Childless Couple":

She needs  
to give love. Her man  
is there, with music,  
money, books, his need,  
to knead, and  
needle her. She bends  
toward plants, the  
earth, her face  
shielded from sun,  
from him,  
her hands tending  
to cup:  
their cat, the  
house, plants  
filling it, moves into  
soft cheesecake  
cushioning his angers,  
filling herself with an air of seasons . . .  
(From a Soft Angle: Poems About Women: 1971)

Berge portrays this woman as trying to fulfill herself through her domestic role since the maternal one is denied her.

Menstruation and menopause are two additional subjects concerning female sexuality that may now be treated poetically. For example, Oates's "Bloodstains" describes women drenched in menstrual blood:

we are bloodstained women  
growing fiercely up out of girls:  
the armholes of our dresses tugging  
the collars tight to bursting  
buttons hanging by threads  
the fronts of these pink cotton dresses straining  
across our breasts

we are so damp with blood that we fear  
the muzzles of dogs will dip into us

. . .

(Red Clay Reader 7: 1970)

Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's poem "Change of Life" (The Little Magazine, Fall-Winter 1971-72) is the only poem I have found so far on that particular aspect of feminine experience. Lines like "Barefoot, I walk the beach,/Dressed in stinging seaweed,/Glistening green" and "In the sandy ruin of my womb, moths/Jostle each other for room" are examples of how Schaeffer attempts to catch the essence of menopause imagistically. "Moths" that "jostle" in the womb are representative of the light tone in which this poem is written. Many of these poems concerning intimate female bodily functions exhibit a light or witty tone, perhaps in an attempt to deal satisfactorily with what many readers might consider tastefully uncertain subjects.

#### Motherhood

In the twentieth century, sentimental poems about children can still be found. A poem called "The Bairn" by Rosamund Greenwood published in a 1968 anthology still reflects the sentimental approach:

Babe, by your helplessness  
Conjure pity in my breast:  
By your little wailing cry  
Bring forth all my bravery.

. . .

(Without Adam)

Perhaps in reaction to such poems, Joyce Carol Oates's  
93 speaker addresses her child in anything but sentimental terms:

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Oates's marriage is childless.

. . .  
Now you've done it, now you're sick.  
What a bore, this twist and flickering of a child's  
    life--  
Off and on and off again and on again  
Like simple summer lightning!  
And now it's off again--  
Here's the mirror, we'll check your breath.  
Alive. Heart in my hand a limp obscene organ, very  
    small.  
Anything else inside?  
Up and around so fast . . .? Sickness never lasts  
    in a kid's rubber veins.  
. . .

What's this business of kids running away?  
Up and down the Alps of bodies  
Kids are running and howling.  
They howl from their mothers' bodies  
And from their mothers' love.  
Little bastards shrink from mothers' kisses and the  
    ermined kingdom  
And sweat of our embrace.  
I made over my wedding dress for your pajamas!  
I made over my suffering entrails for your brains!  
This is a terrible moment but  
What moment is not terrible?  
    (from "A Mother to Her Child," Part I of "Three  
    Dances of Death," Anonymous Sins)

Oates's speaker is the kind of mother that martyrs herself for her child and then never lets the child forget it. Although her hostile attitude to the child is relatively uncommon in poetry, such hostility to children is not uncommon in life.

Maxine Kumin writes successful, realistic poems about her children. Her poem "Father's Song" which she dedicates to her son Vic, turns out to be a tribute to her daughters as much as to her own son. The poem opens by stating that "A son/is a monument . . . ." It then turns to praise of the daughters, with realistic qualifications:

I have not said there is the season  
of tantrums when the throats of doors are cut



with cold slammings. Rooms fill with tears.  
The bedclothes drown in blood  
for these will be women . . . .  
. . . .

But today they come in the hour of their perfect skin  
strict at the waist, hummocking at the thighs.  
The kitchen bellies with the yeast  
of their milky hands. The oven exhales  
a bulge of apple and clover, and the ceiling  
observes the agitation of their putting to rights.  
. . . .

They are  
woodsmoke, bee balm, heartsease  
my two girls  
concise as cats  
fastidious as pearls  
and of them I sing in praise  
whereas my son,  
you are my monument, my stone.  
You go on.  
(The Nightmare Factory: 1970)

"For deLawd" by Lucille Clifton, a black poet, is probably  
an autobiographical poem. It celebrates a black woman's ability  
to keep on "making it" by going on with her business of keeping  
her house and raising her kids. The poem opens with the speaker  
stating her situation:

people say they have a hard time  
understanding how I  
go on about my business  
playing my Ray Charles  
hollering at my kids--

Then the poem widens out to become a tribute to all black mothers--  
mothers who have kept their surviving families together in spite  
of the fact that some of their sons have been murdered:

seem like my Afro  
cut off in some old image  
would show I got a long memory  
and I come from a line  
of black and going on women  
who got used to making it through murdered sons  
and who grief kept on pushing

who fried chicken  
ironed  
swept off the back steps  
who grief kept  
for their still alive sons  
for their sons coming  
for their sons gone  
just pushing

(Good Times: 1969)

Since many women feel that procreation interferes with poetic creation, it is only natural that many have written poems about these fears. Kathryn Hoskins and Carolyn Kizer are two modern poets who have written interesting poems about the conflict between the role of poet and that of mother. Hoskins's poem, "Perhaps to Profit," begins:

So now I put away my books  
And take up childish things again--  
Cry 'Boo', elaborate with blocks.  
Now I bend my spirit, branch  
It down in birch-leaf-bright detail  
To please a child.

Does the bent branch  
Let go always spring back to its birds?  
(Excursions: 1967)

Hoskins's speaker wonders whether her own spirit and intellect will not be reduced by entertaining the child; no matter how enjoyable that task might be, will it be worth it? She also asks herself: "Will the babble of babyhood/ . . . deafen me?" And, will "the emptiness/Of spirit spent on another/Into thriftier times persist?"

Kizer's poem is entitled "Not Writing Poems About Children": and in it she points out with tongue in cheek the difference between poems and children. The poem also reveals that the speaker cannot write while she is immersed in raising her family:

Once I gave birth to living metaphors.

. . .

In despair of poetry, which had fled away,  
From loops and chains of children, these were let grow:

"The little one is you all over . . . ."  
They fulfill their impulses, not mine.

They invent their own categories,  
Clear and arbitrary. No poem needs them.

. . .

Children do not make up for lost occasions--  
"You'd rather kiss that poem than kiss me."

Kizer emphasizes the difference between children and poems, but ends the poem cleverly employing the old metaphor:

Finally, we are left alone with poems,  
Children that we cling to, or relinquish

For their own sakes. The metaphor, like love,  
Springs from the very separateness of things.  
(Midnight Was My Cry: 1971)

In part two of a long, militant poem called "Pro Femina," Kizer states more explicitly (and less poetically) her firm belief that women must dedicate themselves to more than motherhood, which is, as she points out, an impermanent career:

We will be cows for a while, because babies howl for us,  
Be kittens or bitches, who want to eat grass now and  
then  
For the sake of our health. But the role of pastoral  
heroine  
Is not permanent, Jack. We want to get back to the  
meeting.  
(Knock Upon Silence: 1962)

### Parents

Women write fewer poems about their relationships with their parents than about those with their men or children. And father/daughter relationships are less often dealt with as subjects of

poems by women than mother/daughter relationships. But Diane Wakoski is one female poet for whom the father/daughter relationship is central.<sup>94</sup> Her father's absence from home during her childhood, this confessional poet reveals, has had a profound influence on her relationships with other men. "Father," she writes, ". . . makes me know all men will leave me/if I love them . . . ." And

my father  
made me what I am  
a lonely woman  
without a purpose, just as I was  
a lonely child  
without any father . . . .  
(from "The Father of My Country," Inside the  
Blood Factory: 1967)

Father/son and mother/son relationships have long been central themes in literature. Possibly because fathers are rather peripheral in our society to the lives of most daughters, and because daughters have not been encouraged to identify with them but rather with their mothers and their mothers' roles, it is only mother/daughter relationships that seem to be of great significance to most women poets.

If a mother/daughter relationship is a satisfactory one, the problem is to praise or to describe the mother with sentiment but without sentimentality. There is a fine line between these two. Poems that reveal a sympathetic attitude toward mothers frequently do so by praising or describing their domestic or childrearing

Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," of course, is a classic poem about a father. Plath's father's death was a central experience in her life and is a concern which looms large in her work. Also see the section of the last chapter dealing with Anne Sexton.

habits. For example, Genevieve Taggard praises her mother's domestic industry (and reveals a Puritan work-ethic philosophy) by contrasting her own "heady" and "silly" work with her mother's worthwhile domestic work in "To My Mother":

The long delight and early  
I heard in my small years clearly;  
The morning song, bed-making, bustle for new under-  
taking  
With dish-washing and hay-raking,  
This vanished or seemed diminished,  
Was lost, in trouble finished.  
I did nervous work, unsteady, captive work and heady.  
Nothing well-done and ready.

And heard in other places  
Than home, and from foreign faces  
The dauntless gay and breezy communal song of the  
busy,  
I--idle and uneasy.

I said, my work is silly,  
Lonely and willy-nilly.  
See this hand with nicotined habits, this useless  
hand that edits  
A chronicle of debits.

Join, if I can, the makers,  
And the tillers of difficult acres;  
And get somehow this dearly lost, this re-discovered  
rarely  
Habit of rising early.

(Collected Poems: 1938)

A favorite topic of Victorian "poetesses," a dead mother, is taken in hand by Adrienne Rich in "A Woman Mourned by Daughters":

Now, not a tear begun,  
we sit here in your kitchen,  
spent, you see, already.  
You are swollen till you strain  
this house and the whole sky.  
You, whom we so often  
succeeded in ignoring!  
You are puffed up in death

like a corpse pulled from the sea;  
we groan beneath your weight.  
And yet you were a leaf,  
a straw blown on the bed,  
you had long since become  
crisp as a dead insect.  
What is it, if not you,  
that settles on us now  
like satin you pulled down  
over our bridal heads?  
What rises in our throats  
like food you prodded in?  
Nothing could be enough.  
You breathe upon us now  
through solid assertions  
of yourself: teaspoons, goblets,  
seas of carpet, a forest  
of old plants to be watered,  
an old man in an adjoining  
room to be touched and fed.  
And all this universe  
dares us to lay a finger  
anywhere, save exactly  
as you would wish it done.

(Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law: 1967)

Sentimentality is avoided by bluntly referring to the mother as a bloated corpse and by asserting in the beginning that the daughters are not shedding any tears. There is almost too much matter-of-factness. But sentiment is apparent in the daughter's acknowledgment that housekeeping affairs must still be handled in the way the mother would have wanted. It is a sign of the daughters' respect and affection, after all.

"Poem for Women's Liberation" by Joanne Ward reveals daughters finally understanding the sacrifices their mother has made which they have always taken for granted:

It's too little, after all, isn't it, Mother,  
the children who've gone off  
into their new habits  
with only occasional images,  
thinking to liken you  
to the well kept petunias on the porch.

We never cared why  
you kept riding back on the train  
to the small plains town  
with your college education,  
a dark beauty in the model cars  
who had her pick  
and was on her way to Chicago.

In the middle of a morning sickness,  
was it in Chicago . . .  
you learned that you alone were grown in,  
willing to be of good service,  
a rich soil to the point of exhaustion.  
We recall you mending in corners  
of large living and bedrooms.

You could always go back to teaching you said;  
there was always a place to be heard.  
All the words, Mother,  
after the point of no return  
in your wardrobe, on the edge of the bed,  
damning your uses, your hard labor,  
all taken for granted.

After we listen, we go back to our own,  
each wrung in the hand,  
or the voice, or the eye from you,  
grown in a box like petunias,  
remembering how carefully  
you bent over them mornings  
in a lavender blue robe and slippers.

(Poetry Northwest: Summer 1972)

This poem, too, avoids sentimentality. It blends indifference and even hostility expressed during childhood and still present, to some degree, in the relationship with an understanding and sensitive description of the mother's life.

Most of the above poems reveal an empathy between mothers and daughters expressed through the role of wife and housekeeper which the mothers and daughters, to some extent, share. But frequently hostility alone is expressed toward mothers in exactly the same way: they are attacked through childrearing habits or through domestic ones. Most of the hostility is aroused by a lack

of love on the part of the mother. Usually it is the daughter's relationship with her mother during childhood and its effect on her current life that constitutes the problem, as in Colette Inez's "I Snapped the End of My Screaming Hunger":

My thoughts turn  
to gleaming mother  
and a scoured stove  
where I snapped  
the end  
of my screaming hunger  
and ran away  
to live in a sieve.

Lightly shaken every day  
and drained in chutes  
of cold gray water,  
I peer through the holes  
of my hard container  
and cry  
for food.

(The Little Magazine: Fall-Winter 1971-72)

This poem works completely through the domestic imagery associated with the mother and the daughter. And its irony lies in the fact that the speaker finds herself no better satisfied living "in a sieve" than living with a "gleaming mother/and a scoured stove."

Another mother whose attention to household duties was perhaps too conscientious and the results unhappy for her daughter is described in Rosmarie Waldrop's "Confession to Settle a Curse":

You don't  
know  
who I am  
because  
you don't know  
my mother  
she's always been an exemplary mother  
told me so herself  
there were reasons she  
had to lock  
everything that could be locked  
there's so much can be



locked  
in a good German household crowded  
with wardrobes dressers sideboards  
desks trunks caskets coffers all with lock  
and key  
and locked  
it was lots of trouble  
for her  
just carry that enormous key ring  
be bothered all the time  
I wanted scissors stationery  
my winter coat and she had to unlock  
the drawer get it out and lock  
all up again  
me she reproached for lacking  
confidence not being open  
I have a mother I can tell everything  
she told me so  
I've  
been bound  
made fast  
locked  
by the key witch  
but a small  
winner  
I'm not  
in turn locking  
a child  
in my arms

(The Aggressive Ways of the Casual Stranger:  
1972)

An understanding of the degree to which the daughter has been hurt by her mother's behavior depends on how this ambiguous ending is interpreted. Has the daughter her own child now to whom she gives more freedom, more signs of trust, perhaps more free expression of love? Or has the daughter, and will she have, no child at all?

Irene Schram's poem "Love" obviously reveals a mother who loves herself rather than the child she professes to love:

My  
mother's hairline-  
lips split to  
snakes & she  
said she loved  
me. Reaching

for the pink &  
black capsules  
she swallowed them  
with love. Patting  
her jersey hips  
she gave me candy.  
Shutting all the  
lights & going  
down-stairs  
she sat &  
varnished her  
nails. The  
red smell rose  
up the stairs  
& put me to sleep.

(The Smith Poets, an anthology: 1971)

The child is almost smothered--asphyxiated--it seems by the fumes  
of her mother's nail polish. Ironically, it is this that puts  
her to sleep, not a mother's sincerely loving goodnight ritual.

#### Womanhood

The same problems that are present in portraying familial  
relationships are present when women write about women outside  
their families, especially if they wish to praise or sympathize  
with other women's conditions. Judy Grahn has written a fine  
series of realistic portraits of women under the general title  
"The Common Woman." Grahn's portraits are neither too sentimental  
nor too critical. Each separate poem of the series portrays a  
woman who in many ways is unattractive (one suppresses her  
femininity to compete with men; one has taken a woman lover), yet  
there is something admirable about each. The second poem of the  
series describes "Ella, in a square apron, along Highway 80":

She's a copperheaded waitress,  
tired and sharp-worded, she hides  
her bad brown tooth behind a wicked  
smile, and flicks her ass

out of habit, to fend off the pass  
that passes for affection.  
She keeps her mind the way men  
keep a knife--keen to strip the game  
down to her size. She has a thin spine,  
swallows her eggs cold, and tells lies.  
She slaps a wet rag at the truck drivers  
if they should complain. She understands  
the necessity for pain, turns away  
the smaller tips, out of pride, and  
keeps a flask under the counter. Once,  
she shot a lover who misused her child.  
Before she got out of jail, the courts had pounced  
and given the child away. Like some isolated lake,  
her flat blue eyes take care of their own stark  
bottoms. Her hands are nervous, curled, ready  
to scrape.  
The common woman is as common  
as a rattlesnake.

(Contemporaries, an anthology: 1972)

Ella uses what weapons she possesses to keep a certain amount of  
dignity in spite of the poverty--both physical and spiritual--of  
her existence. It is the way women like Ella survive. Grahn's  
series as a whole is an affirmation of the strength of these  
varying women and of women in general. The penultimate lines  
read:

the common woman is as common as the best of bread  
and will rise  
and will become strong--I swear it to you

Treated in a similar manner, Lucille Clifton's "Miss  
Rosie" emerges vividly from the midst of the very meanest  
domestic materials which she resembles and to which she has sunk:

When I watch you  
wrapped up like garbage  
sitting, surrounded by the smell  
of too old potato peels  
or  
when I watch you  
in your old man's shoes  
with your little toe cut out

sitting, waiting for your mind  
like next week's grocery  
I say  
when I watch you  
you wet brown bag of a woman  
who used to be the best looking gal in Georgia  
used to be called the Georgia Rose  
I stand up  
through your destruction  
I stand up  
(Good Times: 1969)

This employment of domestic imagery--the once Georgia Rose now "wrapped up like garbage," now a "wet brown bag of a woman"--is one of the finest and most admirable examples I have found. The woman's present miserable condition is brought to life more effectively by these indirect metaphors than by explicit description.

Another beautifully touching poem is one by Phyllis McGinley called "The Doll House." Here a woman speaker's speedily changing roles in life are subtly contrasted to the permanency of a doll house. The woman has played with the doll house as a girl, has grown up, married, raised children of her own who have played with the doll house, who have grown up, who have left home. The woman is alone again with the toy:

. . .  
Now seed of the past  
Had fearfully flowered. Wholly her gift at last,  
Here was her private estate, a peculiar treasure  
Cut to fancy's measure.  
Now there was none to trespass, no one to mock  
The extravagance of her sewing or her spending . . .

The description of the doll house which ends the poem suggests the woman's awareness that the toy from the beginning of her life represents all the permanency her rapidly expiring life will ever know:

Through the panes she was able  
To peer at her world reduced to the size of dream  
But pure and unaltering.

There stood the dinner table,  
Invincibly a gleam  
With the undisheveled candles, the flowers that  
bloomed  
Forever and forever,  
The wine that never  
Spilled on the cloth or sickened or was consumed.

The Times lay at the doorsill, but it told  
Daily the same unstirring report. The fire  
Painted upon the hearth would not turn cold,  
Or the constant hour change, or the heart tire  
Of what it must pursue,  
Or the guest depart, or anything here be old.

"Nor ever," she whispered, "bid the spring adieu."

And caught into this web of quietnesses  
Where there was neither After nor Before,  
She reached her hand to stroke the unwithering grasses  
Beside the small and incorruptible door.

(Times Three: 1968)

The woman cannot have her childhood again, which the doll house symbolizes. But she will have the perfection the doll house also symbolizes now that her children have left home. This is a rich poem because the doll house works so well as a symbol. There is a sadness in its perfection, its emptiness. The woman's world is "reduced"; its news is "unstirring." This woman represents most women, or at least many women, when their role as childrearer ends.

Female poets often write poems like Grahn's and Clifton's and McGinley's about women who really represent a condition common to womanhood. Margaret Widdemer's "Old Ladies" is another example:

. . .  
They are lost. They have little lone houses  
And over-stuffed rooms.  
Smelling heavy of cooking and clove-like perfumes  
And mothballs and that,

With under it all a faint odor of cat;  
They are waiting for somewhere a curtain to rise  
And real living to wake and begin--  
They laugh, but their eyes crouch . . . ashamed . . .  
Because till they've died  
No one ever must know they are twenty inside.  
(Laughing Their Way, an anthology: 1934)

Widdemer uses domestic details that suggest the kind of protected, self-indulgent, but terribly empty lives many old women lead. Although the poem borders on sentimentality, it basically avoids it because of the rhymes and quick lines.

Of course not all poems by women about other women or about women in general are poems which praise or sympathize. It is sometimes said of women that they do not like themselves, their own sex, very well. Something of this is occasionally borne out in their poems. Adrienne Rich's "Apology" is an interesting example:

I've said: I wouldn't ever  
keep a cat, a dog,  
a bird--  
chiefly because  
I'd rather love my equals.  
Today, turning  
in the fog of my mind,  
I knew, the thing I really  
couldn't stand in the house  
is a woman  
with a mindful of fog  
and bloodletting claws  
and the nerves of a bird  
and the nightmares of a dog.  
(Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law: 1969)

Rich's poem is humorous but also sad because these attributes of women are so often true. But she makes sure to include herself among the foggy-minded ones rather than setting herself above and superior to them which increases the humor and keeps the poem from

being offensive to women readers.

Attempts to define the nature of womanhood are plentiful. A wide variety of descriptions and metaphors are used in these attempts; but all seem to suggest that women lead difficult lives, that they are trapped by their sex and their roles. As long ago as 1923, Elinor Wylie wrote: "I am, being a woman, hard beset;/I live by squeezing from a stone/The little nourishment I get" (from "Let No Charitable Hope," Black Armour: 1923). In 1936 Marjorie Barstow Greebie's poem "Man and Woman" was published; it begins:

To be a woman is to be a thing  
Fast caught within the soil of life--a root  
With no escape save by the way of fruit,  
Without the promise of a song or wing.  
(Contemporary American Women Poets, an  
anthology: 1936)

In 1969, Joyce Carol Oates in "A Woman in Her Secret Life" (Anonymous Sins) observed that for a woman, "Life pauses for years between/a thing and a verb . . . ." Thus, a woman's life is neither being nor doing, a state of suspension. "A life yawned away in flesh," is another way Oates states it in this poem. Louise Bogan's poem "Women" describes them in this way:

Women have no wilderness in them,  
They are provident instead,  
Content in the tight hot cell of their hearts  
To eat dusty bread.

They do not see cattle cropping red winter grass,  
They do not hear  
Snow water going down under culverts  
Shallow and clear.

They wait, when they should turn to journeys,  
They stiffen, when they should bend.  
They use against themselves that benevolence  
To which no man is friend.

They cannot think of so many crops to a field  
Or of clean wood cleft by an axe.  
Their love is an eager meaninglessness  
Too tense, or too lax.

They hear in every whisper that speaks to them  
A shout and a cry.  
As like as not, when they take life over their door-  
sills  
They should let it go by.  
(The Blue Estuaries: 1968)

Bogan portrays women as tame; passive; impractical; unimaginative in regard to things outside their immediate, personal concerns; over-imaginative in regard to personal matters; perhaps fool-hardy. But the last two lines of the poem imply that out of what most would regard as weaknesses, perhaps come women's best attributes. Women who "take life over their door-sills" must be generous, concerned, kind--and maternal.

Women suffer because they are human beings; and most sensitive women suffer in addition because they are women. Penalties are built by our society into the condition of being a female. Unfortunately, these penalties almost guarantee suffering. Some women are more conscious of these conditions than others and, thus, they suffer more. Some no doubt enjoy, even seek, suffering. Some women see themselves being used--being wasted--by their men, their children, their society. They are angry and this anger is what some of the poetry written by women out of their own female experience is about. But women also can use their domestic situations delicately, understatedly, with understanding and insight in order to praise those they love and with whom they share



domestic relationships.

Non-Domestic Subjects

Women may also use their experience or their insights into their own natures to present fresh or startling analogies between their own specialized world and the larger world they share with others. Some contemporary female poets create surprising and/or exciting analogies when they perceive some aspect of nature as having similarities with a woman's world, her work, her nature, or her body. It is unfortunate that women do not employ homely, mundane objects or female experience in this way more often, since it frequently works well.

One good example is found in Elizabeth Bishop's poem "The Map" (The Complete Poems: 1969). Bishop describes one aspect of the map's features as follows: "These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger/like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods."

May Swenson's poem "Waking from a Nap on the Beach" is an extended simile which develops a surprising analogy between the sea and bacon frying:

Sounds like big  
rashers of bacon frying.  
I look up from where I'm lying  
expecting to see stripes

red and white. My eyes drop shut,  
stunned by the sun.  
Now the foam is flames, the long  
troughs charcoal, but

still it chuckles and sizzles, it  
burns and burns, and never gets done.  
The sea is that  
fat.

(Half Sun, Half Sleep: 1967)

Barbara Howes describes cicadas as "so many midget Singer/  
Sewing machines" ("L' Ile du Levan," Light and Dark: 1959). Sandra  
McPherson addresses a decaying pumpkin in "A Pumpkin at New  
Year's" (Poetry Northwest: Spring 1971) as follows: "And indeed  
your stem seems punched into orange gathers/Like a button in a  
mattress." Maxine Kumin observes that calves "come forth with all  
four legs folded in/like a dime store card table" ("The Vealers,"  
The Nightmare Factory: 1970) and that her mare's neck is "important  
as Victorian furniture" ("Night, the Paddock, Some Dreams," Ibid.).  
May Swenson writes of a "sky clean as a cat-licked dish" ("The  
Tide at Long Point," To Mix With Time: 1967). Karen Swenson writes  
in "August" (The Smith Poets, an anthology: 1971) that "August is  
on this morning/like an iron on wet wool."

Perhaps it is natural and inevitable that a woman sees  
strong connections between nature and her own experience and her  
own domestic surroundings. Nature and earth have long been  
personified as female. In fact, by mid-twentieth century, it was  
terribly cliché-ridden to portray a season as a beautiful lady.  
Still, Elinor Wylie wrote a poem called "October" in which that  
season is a woman who changes her clothes from a "tarnished dress/  
And a patchwork cloak!" to a "warm enormous lion skin/Rough gold  
and red" (The Last Poems of Elinor Wylie: 1943). And Mary Slater  
White's "October" "rouges her cheeks, redyes her leafy hair/And  
flaunts flamboyant skirts" (The National League of American Pen  
Women's Anthology: 1951). However, Thola Tabor Schenck's "Dame  
Winter" is less cliché-ridden. Her winter is personified as "a

slattern hag" who "hoards the filth of living in her bag" (Ibid.).

Isabel Tudeen has written a short verse in the form of a dramatic monologue in which Mother Nature speaks:

Of twelve, March is my most unruly child,  
His sweater's torn . . . his trouser knees are out . . . .  
For there are nibs to play and kites to fly,  
And snow-men armies he must put to rout.

He loiters when he should be on his way,  
He teases April with his noisy squeals,  
Or, eager for some fishing, breaks the ice  
And careless, steps on February's heels.

("Between Us Mothers": The National League of  
American Pen Women's Anthology)

Not Keats, but women can have fun on a more meaningful level with the Mother Earth concept. May Swenson's poem, "Her Management," avoids the too-cute trap that seems to be an almost inherent danger in this conceit. Swenson pictures the earth as a slovenly, inept housekeeper; and she uses the magnitude of earth's domain to illustrate, in contrast, our infinitesimally small human place:

She does not place, relate, or name  
the objects of her hall,  
nor bother to repair her ceiling,  
sweep her floor, or paint a wall  
symmetrical with mountains.

Cylindrical, her tent  
is pitched of ocean on one side  
and--rakish accident--  
forest on the other;  
granular, her rug

of many marbles, or of roots,  
or needles, or a bog--  
outrageous in its pattern.  
The furniture is pine  
and oak and birch and beech and elm;

the water couch is fine.  
Mottled clouds, and lightning rifts,  
leaking stars and whole  
gushing moons despoil her roof.  
Contemptuous of control,

she lets a furnace burn all day,  
she lets the winds be wild.  
Broken, rotting, shambled things  
lie where they like, are piled  
on the same table with her sweets,

her fruits, and scented stuffs.  
Her management is beauty.  
Of careless silks and roughs,  
rumpled rocks, the straightest rain,  
blizzards, roses, crows,

April lambs and graveyards,  
she chances to compose  
a rich and sloven manor.  
Her prosperous tapestries  
are too effusive in design

for our analyses--  
we, who through her textures move,  
we specks upon her glass,  
who try to place, relate and name  
all things within her mass.

(To Mix With Time: 1963)

Insights into many subjects besides nature can be gained, of course, through the metaphorical use of femininity or domesticity. Barbara Howes observes, for example, that old men's "flesh hangs like curtains in a house/Long unused, damp as cellars without wine" ("Light and Dark" from her book of the same name). Susan Yarde observes that "the city faces spring with the resigned face/of a woman who has borne too many children" ("Spring Tide," Morning Glory Man 1968). Rosellen Brown relates that her immigrant grandmother saw America's promises "like cups,/casually broken" ("Coming to This," Some Deaths in the Delta: 1970). Diane Wakoski, or her speaker, in "The Desert Motorcyclist" (The Motorcycle Betrayal Poems: 1971) declares: "I am riding away from you,/away from that voice that troubles me,/like a leak in the basement." Mona Van Duyn combines both domesticity and femininity in

one metaphor, describing a "girlish bolster/of breasts" (from "The Pieta, Rhenish, 14th C., The Cloisters," To See, To Take 1971).

Extended Metaphors

Women would do well to employ to a greater degree domestic or female experience in extended metaphors as the Puritans did. The very contemporary poets who do employ this technique create some intriguing effects. Adrienne Rich's "Side by Side" is one example:

Ho! in the dawn  
how light we lie

stirring faintly as laundry  
left all night on the lines.

You, a lemon-gold pyjama,  
I, a trousseau-sheet, fine

linen worn paper-thin in places,  
worked with the maiden monogram.

Lassitude drapes our folds.  
We're slowly bleaching

with the days, the hours, and the years.  
We are getting finer than ever,

time is wearing us to silk,  
to sheer spiderweb.

The eye of the sun, rising, looks in  
to ascertain how we are coming on.

(Necessities of Life: 1966)

The metaphor is interesting because it suggests both that the people are aging in the manner of laundry deteriorating, and that they are losing their sexuality. The man has the semblance of only a shell of a masculine figure; the woman is flat, maidenish.

Muriel Rukeyser's "Pouring Milk Away" is a poem in which

the literal domestic object, a carton of spoiled milk, and the domestic action, throwing it away, have many implied meanings:

Here, again. A smell of dying in the milk-pale  
carton,  
And nothing then but pour the milk away.  
More of the small and killed, the child's, wasted,  
Little white arch of the drink and taste of day.  
Spoiled, gone and forgotten; thrown away.

Day after day I do what I condemned in countries.  
Look, the horror, the waste of food and bone.  
You will know why when you have lived alone.  
(Body of Waking: 1958)

The wasted milk works as a metaphor for many and different things, such as: the passing and wasting of time, the poor and starving children in other countries, the children those who live alone will never have.

In another example, Rosmarie Waldrop sees the natural freedom of nature as antithetical to mankind's instincts to clean, to contain, to organize matter; and she uses her own housekeeping and her own knowledge of the female body to express the affinity of nature for chaos. The poem is called "Cleaning":

Yes I have a broom the box  
of Spic and Span's been opened  
but matter doesn't like  
to be contained as women  
know our wombs twitch bellies  
bulge fat grows around the hips  
I'm careful  
make sure I miss the corners  
just coax it  
into a mere pretense of  
clean lines reassure us  
this world is ours  
well  
this house  
even so the wood groans at night  
little hunks of plaster tear free and fall  
there will be a revolt the walls

will swell bulge from the seams and burst the joints  
the mortar crumble and the house cave in and spread  
sprawl swallow the street where asphalt melts  
and ferments and all the elements ooze  
back to chaos

(The Aggressive Ways of the Casual Stranger: 1972)

One of the finest and most Puritan-like examples I've found  
of the metaphorical use of homely things as an emblem for larger  
or ultimate concerns is Anne Halley's "Dear God, the Day Is Grey":

Dear God, the day is grey. My house  
is not in order. Lord, the dust  
sifts through my rooms and with my fear,  
I sweep mortality, outwear  
my brooms, but not this leaning floor  
which lasts and groans. I, walking here,  
still loathe the labors I would love  
and hate the self I cannot move.

And God, I know the unshined boards,  
the flaking ceiling, various stains  
that mottle these distempered goods,  
the greasy cloths, the jagged tins,  
the dog that paws the garbage cans.  
I know what laborings, love, and pains,  
my blood would will, yet will not give:  
the knot of hair that clogs the drains  
clots in my throat. My dyings thrive.

The refuse, Lord, that I put out  
burns in vast pits, incessantly.  
All piecemeal deaths, trash, undevout  
And sullen sacrifice, to thee.

(Between Wars and Other Poems: 1965)

The speaker expresses guilt at the unkept house and a conflict  
between distaste of doing the dreary household chores and distaste  
of the disordered house if they are not done. Our Puritan  
obsession with dirt (equalling sin) is apparent here. In the  
larger sense of the poem, the speaker's struggle is to put her  
life in order. Halley's speaker in "Housewife's Letter" To Mary,"

another poem from this, Halley's only book to date, reveals on one level the same frustration and despair at housekeeping duties:

. . . Inside my house,  
uncustomed, unceremonious,  
I seem to wade among the shards  
proliferating, wrecked discards,  
a whole decline of Western Man  
in microcosm: who'd begin  
to sort it out, make do, decide  
to deal with this, to let that ride--  
make love, patch plaster, choose your work,  
your car, your party, and your church,  
keep conscience, throw out sense of sin,  
free impulse, but in discipline--  
a ruptured rug, a beaten chair  
stare at me, stupid as despair.  
. . .

Here the significance of the metaphor is even greater. Not only is the speaker's environment representative of her own life, her own choices, but of the entire complex, throw-away, materialistic western civilization.

In both of these poems Halley uses domestic experience as both subject and metaphor. Both poems evoke in concrete detail the world of women and at the same time go beyond that world to deal with universal concerns.

This selection of poems illustrating the use of domestic experience in recent American poetry reveals that women are trying to overcome the limitations of their heritage both in kinds of subjects and in techniques. Some women are attempting to be more realistic in dealing with familial relationships by writing in an objective or in a hostile tone. Wit is occasionally attempted as well. Also, women poets who read widely, who do their homework, are no doubt trying consciously to experiment with different and



unique points of view. Thus, the present period both parallels and extends the period from roughly 1915 through the early 1920's when women poets also were experimenting and growing.

CHAPTER VI

MS. PLATH/MRS. HUGHES

You were christened in the beginning Sylvia Plath  
and changed that name for Mrs. Hughes and bred  
and went on round the bend  
till the oven seemed the proper place for you.  
(from "Dream Song 172" by John Berryman)

For Sylvia Plath, domesticity itself is an ultimate concern. Like Edna St. Vincent Millay, the major female poet of the first quarter of this century, Plath, the major figure of the present quarter, is concerned with the roles of women: women as poets, women as wives, women as independent and equal members of society. But where Millay's tone is one of defiance, Plath's is one of hate. Where Millay sees women as equal or having different but equal or even superior qualities, Plath sees women as victims. There is some defiance in Plath, but there is more self-destruction. Where Millay deals in humor, Plath deals in horror. Millay represents the dawning of the modern female consciousness; Plath represents the evolution of that consciousness in its most extreme form.

Plath speaks for at least a generation of women, and she speaks to all women. Equally important is how she uses the experience of being female--the transformation of experience into poetry or fiction. She married and separated, bore two children and lost one, pursued a career and felt it slipping away because of her domestic responsibilities. Her writing came increasingly

to deal with these matters.

Plath's poems are termed "confessional"; her novel, The Bell Jar, she admitted, was scarcely disguised autobiography. The details of her life are relevant, therefore, when considering how she deals with women. She was born in 1932. Her father died in 1940, and her mother supported the family (Sylvia and a younger brother) by teaching girls who were preparing for careers as medical secretaries. Between Sylvia's junior and senior years at Smith College, she suffered a mental breakdown; and she attempted suicide. Recovered, she graduated and went to Cambridge on a Fellowship. There she met and in 1956 married a fellow poet, Ted Hughes. The couple returned to the United States where both taught for a while. She gave up teaching for a full-time writing career in 1959; but in April of 1960 she bore her first child, Frieda. In 1961 she had a miscarriage, an appendectomy, and another pregnancy. In January of 1962, her son Nicholas was born. Later that year, the Hugheses separated. And in January of 1963 she again attempted suicide. This time she did not fail.

The Bell Jar, published in 1963, and The Colossus, in 1960, are Plath's only two books published during her lifetime. Ariel appeared in 1965 in London (1966 in New York); Crossing the Water in 1971; Winter Trees in September of 1972. The corpus of her writing has been smartly managed. Thus, previously unpublished poems are still appearing almost ten years after her death. This phenomenon seems to be partly the cause and partly the effect of a

cult that has arisen around her in the interim. In the last days of her life, however, the Ariel poems were being rejected as too extreme, too bitter, too far out. The Bell Jar was receiving adverse criticism or very qualified praise. When Keats died, Byron wrote a parodic epigram that begins: "Who killed John Keats?/ I, says the Quarterly." Although it may be an exaggeration to say that criticism killed anyone, Plath's depression over the reception to her work, similar to Keats's, certainly may have been a contributing factor.

Today, Sylvia Plath is one of Harper & Row's best-selling authors. Her posthumous books reveal to what an extent she had become concerned with her experiences as a woman and with her perceptions of the experiences of other women. The final poems deal frequently with the experiences of her own life after The Bell Jar ends.

It is the novel that makes it explicitly clear that Plath was confused and frustrated by the necessity of defining herself as a woman. In The Bell Jar, Esther Greenwood, Plath's spokeswoman, is besieged by the influences that propagate the myth that the be-all and end-all of a woman's existence is a husband, a house, and a handful of kids. In the midst of such influences, Esther asserts that she has other plans, or at least other options: to be a famous poet, a brilliant professor, an editor, a voyager, a champion athlete. Each of these futures, in addition to that of wife and mother, is envisioned as a separate fig upon a tree. She can pick only one; and as she hesitates,

debating with herself which of the mutually exclusive goodies to pick, "the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at her feet."

Not choosing is an act of rejection; in its most extreme form it must lead to rejection of life itself. This is what happens to Esther; her breakdown and suicide attempt are the outcome. Because she lives and is cured, Esther will take up again the act of choosing. Her ex-boyfriend, Buddy Willard, naturally assumes she will choose marriage. "I wonder who you'll marry now . . . you've been here," are his final words. These words are natural because marriage is expected. But in terms of Esther's suffering in the novel, they are certainly ironic.

Esther resents assumptions that she will do the "natural" thing for a woman--marry and have a family. On the other hand, she wants all the experiences, all the figs. The problem is compounded by the fact that Esther sees the women who surround her, who fill the roles, as poor models. Esther derides "nice" girls as Pollyannas; she is both attracted and repelled by "bad" ones. Her adult models are ineffectual or, as seen through Esther's eyes, stupid. Dodo Conway has grown up to personify--

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Harriet Rosenstein makes this observation in an article entitled "Reconsidering Sylvia Plath," MS, September 1972, pp. 44-51+.

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Esther's doctors are possible exceptions. They are sensitive and intuitive women, who, nevertheless, are capable of miscalculation. It is Dr. Teresa who sends Esther to the hated male psychiatrist, Dr. Gordon. Dr. Nolan almost undoes Esther's progress by delaying telling her of an upcoming shock treatment.

indeed to overdo--The Ideal Woman. The prolific race Dodo represents, with six little Conways present and a seventh coming, is not about to become extinct. In a car like a hearse, Dodo literally drives Esther to her first electric shock therapy appointment. Jay Cee, Esther's editor, is characterized by complicated hats and by her concern over whom to take to lunch. Esther's mother is portrayed as basically insensitive. When Esther cannot bear the idea of more shock treatments and promises "to be good," her mother responds: "I knew you'd decide to be all right again." Esther's mother's solutions to all problems--at least to the problem of an unmarried daughter who shows no inclination to grab onto her only beau--is to learn a trade. Shorthand is to be Esther's salvation.

Esther discovers that society, too, pressures a girl to conform; that is, to attract a man, to raise a family. Big business has a financial stake in these tribal mores. Esther, in New York as guest editor to Mademoiselle magazine, is deluged with hair stylings, cosmetic kits, fashion shows. Esther is not beautiful, but she would like to be. Esther is not popular, but she would like to be. She rejects the products that promise her these goals as she rejects her only beau, not out of indifference but from more complex motives. And her behavior goes beyond simple rejection. She not only throws away her clothes and neglects to wash her hair for weeks, she also attempts to kill herself. Esther wants to kill the thing in her whose ambivalence is killing her. Esther wants to extinguish her capacity to

desire and reject the same thing at the same time.

Symptomatic of her ambivalence, Esther alternates between insisting that she will never marry and insisting that she will marry and have a parcel of kids. At one point she bitterly exclaims: "If I had to wait on a baby all day, I would go mad." But one of the ironies of The Bell Jar is the fact that the reader knows from the beginning of the book that she will have a baby. Discussing her New York gifts, she remarks: "I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with." At the book's end, her release from the sanitarium seems to her like the ritual of a wedding. However, the ceremony she has just witnessed "at the altar" has not been a wedding but a funeral. The funeral is for fellow-patient Joan, a suicide and kind of black alter-ego to Esther. The prophecy, the intimation of impending death, hangs over Plath's last words. Esther pictures Joan's coffin being lowered into the ground, and she pictures how "that shadow would marry this shadow."

It is the shadow of the tree with its mutually exclusive figs that dominates the novel, however. Esther concocts her vision after reading a story of a Jewish man and a nun who keep meeting while picking figs. On one occasion, they see a bird's egg in a nest in the tree hatch. The effect of this sight on the couple is to make them touch the backs of their hands together. Here is a story of ideal love. It is ideal because it is forbidden and because it is hopeless. Its participants are exotic (the nun

is "beautiful" and "dark"), and they are super-sensitive. Its physical consummation is the most delicate imaginable: only the backs of their hands' touch. And of course the couple are observed and their meetings terminated. Esther wants to apply this ideal to her own life, but it does not work. She and Buddy Willard, she says, are "like that Jewish man and that nun" but "what we had seen wasn't a bird coming out of an egg but a baby coming out of a woman, and then something awful happened and we went our separate ways." The awful thing that happens afterward is that Esther learns that Buddy is not a virgin and that his innocent wooing has been a pose. But viewing a birth has been traumatic for Esther too. Nothing real lives up to her romantic vision, to the ideal.

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The woman in the delivery room is a Mrs. Tomolillo, "and all the time the baby was being born she never stopped making this unhuman whooping noise." Plath's control of this scene is excellent. She lets such description of what Esther heard and saw speak for her. "I heard the scissors close on the woman's skin like cloth and the blood begin to run down--a fierce, bright red," Esther recalls. When asked by Buddy, "Well, how was it?"

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Significantly a woman in the mental ward of the hospital in which Esther is treated after her bout with fifty sleeping pills is another Mrs. Tomolillo. This Mrs. Tomolillo rejects Esther and mocks her mother. (For some reason, Tomolillo also appears and reappears in Plath's short fiction. A Mrs. Tomolillo is another mental patient in a short story called "The Daughters of Blossom Street." And all the symptoms with which she is endowed in The Bell Jar are attributed to a nameless female patient in "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams." Also, a Mr. Tomolillo is an inquisitive bystander in "The Fifteen Dollar Eagle.")



she only replies, "Wonderful. . . . I could see something like that every day"; but then admits she "didn't feel up to asking him if there were any other ways to have babies."

After these painful initiations into reality, Esther rejects Buddy's marriage proposal. She is aware at this point of one of her basic problems and admits: "If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days." But she is not aware how serious her problem really is; and her breakdown follows.

Thus, The Bell Jar reveals Plath's obsession with the frustrations of being a woman. She was intensely aware of the subtle pressures in the environment that encourage conformity to stereotyped roles. Rejection was difficult because something in her wanted it all. In her life, she tried for the compromise. Her later writing and her death indicate that she considered that compromise a failure.

These concerns with feminine roles and feminine experience expressed in The Bell Jar and in her later work are foreshadowed in at least five poems in The Colossus. Its first poem, "The Manor Garden," was written in the fall of 1959 during her first

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pregnancy. It addresses the child she carries:

The fountains are dry and the roses over.  
Incense of death. Your day approaches.  
The pears fatten like little buddhas.  
A blue mist is dragging the lake.

You move through the era of fishes,  
The smug centuries of the pig--  
Head, toe and finger  
Come clear of the shadow. History

Nourishes these broken flutings,  
These crowns of acanthus,  
And the crow settles her garments.  
You inherit white heather, a bee's wing,

Two suicides, the family wolves,  
Hours of blankness. Some hard stars  
Already yellow the heavens.  
The spider on its own string

Crosses the lake. The worms  
Quit their usual habitations.  
The small birds converge, converge  
With their gifts to a difficult birthing.

The first line and a half create the apprehensive, foreboding tone that dominates. Here are death in the midst of birth; the external, natural world at odds with the internal, human one; perhaps again the touch of the prophetic. Only momentarily does a correspondence occur between the natural and the maternal: the

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Because of the intimate, personal nature of most of her writing, it is relevant to correlate the events of her life with her artistic handling of female concerns. Therefore, I have indicated the probable date of composition when known and/or the date of first publication as well as the collection in which each poem appears. My source for probable dates of composition is Ted Hughes's "Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems," Encounter, Vol. 21, No. 4 (October 1963), 45+ and reprinted in The Art of Sylvia Plath, ed. Charles Newman (Bloomington, Indiana, 1970), pp. 187-195. Most of the poems from Ariel and all of those in Winter Trees were written in the last year of her life. Dates of first publication are from The Art of Sylvia Plath.

pears fatten as the fetus evolves and the womb fills. But wolves and the hard stars, the spider and worms outweigh pears, fishes, the bee's wing, heather.

Not apprehension but real revulsion to motherhood is expressed in "Sow." Written earlier than "The Manor Garden," the poem "Sow" is a portrait of a Brobdingnagian hog not yet "hedged by a litter of feat-footed ninnies/Shrilling her hulk/To halt for a swig at the pink teats," but a monstrous maiden pig awaiting a "boar fabulous enough to straddle her heat." In action, this comic, this grotesque sow consumes the world. Exaggeration is one dimension of Plath's vision. The sow is one of her colossal figures. Although the sow is ridiculous, she is frightening. For Plath, she represents the destiny of the adult female--the Dodo Conways of the human world.

"I Want, I Want" is a more difficult poem than "Sow," but it seems to describe the terrible, insatiable demands of the "baby-god."

Open-mouthed, the baby god  
Immense, bald, though baby-headed,  
Cried out for the mother's dug.  
The dry volcanoes cracked and spit,

Sand abraded the milkless lip.  
Cried then for the father's blood  
Who set wasp, wolf and shark to work,  
Engineered the gannet's beak.

Dry-eyed, the inveterate patriarch  
Raised his men of skin and bone,  
Barbs on the crown of gilded wire,  
Thorns on the bloody rose-stem.

The final two images vaguely suggest the crucifixion and set up a

parallel between it and childbirth which Plath develops more extensively in later poems.

Another Colossus poem, "Moonrise," uses exceedingly ominous imagery and allusions to Christ's death in relation to pregnancy:

Berries redden. A body of whiteness  
Rots, and smells of rot under its headstone  
Though the body walk out in clean linen.

I smell that whiteness here, beneath the stones  
Where small ants roll their eggs, where grubs fatten.  
Death may whiten in sun or out of it.

Death whitens in the egg and out of it.

And the poem concludes with an address to Lucina, goddess of childbirth:

Lucina, bony mother, laboring  
Among the socketed white stars, your face  
Of candor pares white flesh to the white bone,

Who drag our ancient father at the heel,  
White-bearded, weary. The berries purple  
And bleed. The white stomach may ripen yet.

Plath seems to transform Lucina into a Woman in the Moon. The moon is usually connected with the female cycle of menstruation, the antithesis of pregnancy. And the child of the labor Plath describes is an "ancient father," a figure resembling Father Time or perhaps Father Death, rather than a child. Thus, the birth or the anticipation of that experience includes its antithesis. The horror here matches any created in the last Ariel poems.

All in all, these early poems which were written around the time of her first pregnancy and which she herself selected for publication in her first collection reveal degrees of mental

stress over the maternal condition. Motherhood may be something monstrous, as the child may be. Signs attending birth are not propitious. There is a confusion over the meaning of the event reminiscent of the attitude of Eliot's magi.

The Colossus also introduces one of Plath's single women. "The Spinster," written in the year of her marriage, describes a woman who denounces the disorder that romance brings into her life. Romance is symbolized in this poem by the fertility which spring promises, "the rank wilderness of fern and flower." The spinster adopts, instead, the "frosty discipline" of winter.

And round her house she set  
Such a barricade of barb and check  
Against mutinous weather  
As no mere insurgent man could hope to break  
With curse, fist, threat  
Or love either.

In addition to disorder, there is a violence in love that threatens the spinster, that victimizes her.

Some early but uncollected poems also explore the experience of the woman rejecting the man. In "The Snowman on the Moor" (Poetry: July, 1957), Plath investigates more closely the spinster's choice. In "Snowman," a man and a woman have had an argument and the woman flees. However, escape is not really what she wants. "Come find me," she cries. But "he did not come." Clearly it is pursuit that the woman wants: "police and hounds to bring her in." She wants the demonstration on the man's part of his desire for her, a sign of his submission. The second part of the poem shows how the woman is subjugated instead. She is

subjugated not by a figure of passion but by a figure that represents the wintry world into which she has fled--the spinster's world of "frosty discipline."

It was no fire-blurting fork-tailed demon  
Volcanoed hot  
From marble snow-heap of moor to ride that woman

With spur and knout  
Down from pride's size: instead, a grisly-thewed  
Austere, corpse-white

Giant heaved into the distance, stone-hatcheted,  
Sky-high, and snow  
Floured his whirling beard, and at his tread

Ambushed birds by  
Dozens dropped dead in the hedges: o she felt  
No love in his eye,

Worse--saw dangling from that spike-studded belt  
Ladies' shaved skulls:  
Mournfully the dry tongues clacked their guilt:

'Our wit made fools  
Of kings, unmanned kings' sons: our masteries  
Amused court halls:

For that brag, we barnacle these iron thighs."  
Throned in the thick  
Of a blizzard, the giant roared up with his  
Chittering trophies.

From brunt of axe-crack  
She shied sideways: a white fizz! and the giant,  
pursuing,  
Crumbled to smoke.

Humbled then, and crying,  
The girl bent homeward, brimful of gentle talk  
And mild obeying.

The women already conquered by the cold giant are, significantly, witty women. They exist as heads: women without bodies. Their wit threatened men, it unmanned them. In turn, the women themselves were punished--they lost their femininity, their sexuality.

The fleeing girl is humbled by her vision of the alternative to the embattled state in which she and the man live. This vision is of the frigid, truncated world of the woman alone, the world without love. Although the giant does not succeed in adding her head to his collection and does, in fact, disintegrate, he also wins. The giant is male because males rule the woman's world, her choices. The man to whom the woman humbly returns rules her real world. The giant who personifies the executioner--the punisher of women who rebel--rules her imaginary world of women unsubjugated and, therefore, unloved by men. The vision in which no alternative is tenable becomes more and more Plath's way of seeing the world.

"Pursuit" is a similar, early, uncollected poem (Atlantic: January, 1957). Its speaker is a woman who cannot transcend her own physical nature. Like the woman in "Snowman," she flees from a man because he is capable of hurting her. However, because of his strength and her weakness, she knows she will succumb. The woman is the victim not only of the male but of her own sexuality as well. She is pursued by a panther, a creature which embodies in the poem both the idea of the ravaging male and the woman's own desire:

Keen the rending teeth and sweet  
The singeing fury of his fur;  
His kisses parch, each paw's a briar,  
Doom consummates that appetite.

Here the beast represents the man, whose lovemaking both wounds and pleases. The assonance between "teeth" and "sweet" helps to

emphasize the paradox. In a following stanza, the woman admits her own desires: "his ardor snares me, lights the trees,/And I run flaring in my skin." Finally she is overcome by her awareness of the beast in herself. She recognizes her own lust as well as the cruel brilliance of his: "Appalled by secret want, I rush/From such assault of radiance." Such intensity and such awareness frighten the woman, and she wants to repress them. She bolts the doors. Nevertheless as the poem concludes, the woman knows: "The panther's tread is on the stairs/Coming up and up the stairs."

After 1960, Plath frequently wrote about the woman who did not escape: the humbled woman, the trapped woman, the married woman. One of these is portrayed in a short story entitled "The Fifty-Ninth Bear" (London Magazine: February, 1961). This story is possibly Plath's most successful short fiction. It illustrates the relationship between Norton and Sadie, a young couple two years married. It is primarily Norton's story: his analysis of his wife's dependence, his resultant superiority and patronization of her. What Norton senses but does not care to examine, however, is the power of Sadie's femininity. He feels "bearish" in his intimacies with her; afterwards he feels "unmanned." The plot of the story is simply that Norton and Sadie, vacationing in one of the western parks, are counting bears. The night before they are to leave, they have counted fifty-eight. Sadie has a bet with Norton that they will see exactly fifty-nine. This final night culminates a day in which Sadie's childishness has been especially apparent to Norton. She has been peeved and sulky



because he had a headache and would not accompany her to view a geyser. In the face of her behavior, Norton feels he has demonstrated his superior reasonableness. Norton indulges his wife's behavior because it makes him feel masterful. In the night, then, after their lovemaking, a bear raids Norton and Sadie's camp. Norton sees it trampling Sadie's sunhat. He is infuriated--this act seems a defilement of Sadie herself--and he attempts to repel the bear. The last thing Norton hears is Sadie's cry--"whether of terror or triumph he could not tell. It was the last bear, her bear, the fifty-ninth."

The fifty-ninth bear is called on the scene apparently by Sadie's "will." Norton felt he had this kind of power, to will animals to appear, and he was at first confident that he could will the bear away. "But there was another will working," Plath writes, "a will stronger, even, than his." Sadie, therefore, would seem to triumph. But she is no admirable heroine. She is childish, petty. The reader can perceive that Norton encourages her to act this way. But even though she is seen only through Norton's eyes, she cannot be totally excused.

Women dominated. Women manipulated. Women subjugated. Plath turns the subject this way and that. She seems to see these conditions as inevitable. She writes in The Bell Jar: "I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard's kitchen mat."

Men train their wives to serve. In a poem describing an ocean voyage entitled "On Deck," she observes:

And the white-haired jeweler from Denmark is carving  
A perfectly faceted wife to wait  
On him hand and foot, quiet as a diamond.

Women like Sadie seem to need to be dominated, domineered; perhaps they love it:

Every woman adores a Fascist,  
The boot in the face, the brute  
Brute heart of a brute like you.  
(from "Daddy": Ariel)

Still the resentment, the rebellion bubbles up. To be married is to be in purdah, in plaster, in jail.

Plath sees a bride as a woman upon whom a certain kind of seclusion is forced, a woman in "Purdah" (Winter Trees). The bride sees herself become a private possession to be enjoyed by her owner at his will. "I am his./Even in his Absence," the woman says. And

I  
Revolve in my  
Sheath of impossibles,  
  
Priceless and quiet  
Among these parakeets, macaws!

Her resentment builds quietly:

O chatterers  
  
Attendants of the eyelash  
I shall unloose  
One feather, like the peacock.  
  
Attendants of the lip!  
I shall unloose  
One note

Shattering  
The chandelier  
Of air that all day plies

Its crystals,  
A million ignorants.  
Attendants!

And finally her resentment bursts (as Sadie's, unknown to Norton,  
must have done):

Attendants!  
And at his next step  
I shall unloose

I shall unloose--  
From the small jeweled  
Doll he guards like a heart--

The lioness,  
The shriek in the bath,  
The cloak of holes.

Rebellion, revenge--these are the commitments sworn in the final stanza. The woman in purdah recalls Plath's more well-known Lady Lazarus, whose climactic boast in the face of all her (male) enemies is: "I eat men like air!"

The prisoner of a poem called "The Jailor" (Encounter: October, 1963) is also desperate over her treatment and the jailor's demands on her:

He has been burning me with cigarettes  
Pretending I am a Negress with pink paws.  
I am myself. That is not enough.

The prisoner despairs, however, of escape--partly at least because of the man's dependency on her:

I wish him dead or away.  
That, it seems is the impossibility,  
That being free. What would the dark  
Do without fevers to eat?

What would the light  
Do, without eyes to knife, what would he  
Do, do do without me?

Such dependency is also acknowledged in "In Plaster" (Crossing the Water), where the relationship between body and cast is described as "a kind of marriage." The metaphor is highly successful, the poem working at both the literal and the metaphorical levels. Thus the body and cast have an interdependency, the cast playing a supporting role like "the best of nurses." When the body begins to heal, however, and has visions of shucking the cast, he discovers that "living with her was like living with my own coffin/Yet I still depended on her, though I did it regretfully."

Marriage, like a cast or a prosthesis, fills a need, according to Plath. Certainly it is not a healthy relationship that she envisions, rather it is literally a sick one. "The Applicant" (Ariel), for example, is a poem about a prospective spouse.

First, are you our sort of a person?  
Do you wear  
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,  
A brace or a hook,  
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,  
Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then  
How can we give you a thing?  
Stop crying.  
Open your hand.  
Empty? Empty.

The applicant is then portrayed as the groom:

Here is a hand  
  
To fill it and willing  
To bring teacups and roll away headaches

And do whatever you tell it.  
Will you marry it?  
It is guaranteed

To thumb shut your eyes at the end  
And dissolve of sorrow.  
We make new stock from the salt.  
I notice you are stark naked.  
How about this suit--

Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.  
Will you marry it?  
It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof  
Against fire and bombs through the roof.  
Believe me, they'll bury you in it.

Now your head, excuse me, is empty.  
I have the ticket for that.  
Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.  
Well, what do you think of that?  
Naked as paper to start

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,  
In fifty, gold.  
A living doll, everywhere you look.  
It can sew, it can cook,  
It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.  
You have a hole, it's a poultice.  
You have an eye, it's an image.  
My boy, it's your last resort.  
Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.

The bride will fit him like a tuxedo for his wedding or a coffin  
for his funeral. Indeed, one is the same as the other. She will  
obey. She will support him the way the cast supports the body.  
This woman is a domestic blob. She is a kind of Gracie Allen  
puppet: "It can sew, it can cook,/It can talk, talk, talk."

Plath continued to explore the subject woman with child  
as well as that of woman with man. As previously noted, the  
poems in The Colossus dealing with maternity are somewhat less

than enthusiastic. Plath did write, however, some poems that express very positive, good feelings about children. Yet she wrote few poems on any subject in which the mood does not turn downward at the end. If she perceives any joy, any little glimpse of beauty, she is almost sure to drop it climactically. Thus her poetic technique frequently parallels what literally happens in her poem "Balloons." The reader (in the poem, her child) sits contemplating a rosy world (glimpsed through a red balloon) when bang! He sits back holding his "red shred." Her short poem "Child" (Winter Trees) illustrates her typical deflated closing:

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.  
I want to fill it with colours and ducks.  
The zoo of the new

Whose names you meditate--  
April snowdrop, Indian pipe,  
Little

Stalk without wrinkle,  
Pool in which images  
Should be grand and classical

Not this troublous  
Wringing of hands, this dark  
Ceiling without a star.

The speaker wants to present the child with only the objects and experiences appropriate to its youth and innocence. But the final stanza suggests instead that disturbing emotions and dark vistas are the reluctant offering.

There are too many poems concerning pregnancy or children that close in this way to examine them all. To mention a few

titles, "The Night Dances" (Ariel), which Ted Hughes states is about their son Nicholas dancing in his crib, and "Heavy Women" (Crossing the Water), a poem about pregnancy, are two. "You're" (Ariel) is an exception to this habit of ending on a note of pessimism or of terror. "You're" was composed before the birth of her first child. It describes a fetus but avoids revealing that this is the subject. Unless its metaphors can be defined, the meaning of the poem is obscure:

Clownlike, happiest on your hands,  
Feet to the stars, and moon-skulled,  
Gilled like a fish. A common-sense  
Thumbs-down on the dodo's mode.  
Wrapped up in yourself like a spool,  
Trawling your dark as owls do.  
Mute as a turnip from the Fourth  
Of July to All Fools' Day,  
O high-riser, my little loaf.  
Vague as fog and looked for like mail.  
Farther off than Australia.  
Bent-backed Atlas, our travelled prawn.  
Snug as a bud and at home  
Like a sprat in a pickle jug.  
A creel of eels, all ripples.  
Jumpy as a Mexican bean.  
Right, like a well-done sum.  
A clean slate, with your own face on.

"Metaphors" (Crossing the Water) is a poem like "You're."

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,  
An elephant, a ponderous house,  
A melon strolling on two tendrils.  
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!

This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.  
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.  
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.  
I've eaten a bag of green apples,  
Boarded the train there's no getting off.

The title "Metaphors for a Pregnant Woman" was used when this

poem was first published (Summer 1960) and made it originally less of a riddle. There seems some ambivalence in the attitude of the speaker as the poem closes, but the poem remains light and attempts to be humorous.

"Words for a Nursery" (August 1961) also plays this metaphorical game:

Rosebud, knot of worms,  
Heir of the first five  
Shapers, I open:  
Five moony crescents  
For eyes to light me  
Toward what I can grab,  
Milk-spout, big finger  
So many ladders  
Giving a leg up  
To these limber hooks.

The referent is a baby's hand, his fingers. Plath liked the metaphor game so well, she wrote four more stanzas to this poem employing it. This type of verse is clever; however, cleverness alone does not make good poetry. In these poems she is dealing with an inherently sentimental subject in a merely cute manner. These poems constitute some of her weakest work. It seems significant that she could not deal with maternity or babies in a positive or hopeful manner and at the same time raise the quality of writing out of the level of mere verse and into the realm of true poetry.

Sentimentality or cuteness are charges seldom leveled against Sylvia Plath. She is more often accused of excess hostility, of hysteria. Most of her poems about maternity exhibit these characteristics. In "Brasilia" (Winter Trees), for



instance, the speaker's baby is

a nail  
Driven in, driven in.  
He shrieks in his grease,  
  
Bones nosing for distances,  
And I, nearly extinct,  
His three teeth cutting  
  
Themselves on my thumb--  
And the star,  
And the old story.

Harriet Rosenstein writes of this passage: "There is an arrogance in the analogy, excess in the degree of suffering the speaker experiences, and loathing for the child. 'Brasilia' envisions the universe as an ongoing crucifixion, its first victim, Mary, martyred to her Son before He was martyred to the world."

Other poems reveal this intense fear over threatening figures of children. In "Parliament Hill Fields" (Crossing the Water), a bevy of children is playing. As the speaker approaches them, she observes that their tightly knit group opens like a "crocodile . . . to swallow me." The fear is one of survival. Like the baby-god, children make demands that are often disturbing, cruel: "These children are after something, with hooks and cries" ("Berck-Plage": Ariel). Fear and resentment of children are as prevalent as fear and resentment of men.

She did write one poem, apparently about her son, that omits both the depressing ending and shuns the clever metaphorical game approach. This poem is "For a Fatherless Son" (Winter

Trees). It is one of the most touching poems she wrote:

You will be aware of an absence, presently,  
Growing beside you, like a tree,  
A death tree, color gone, an Australian gum tree--  
Balding, gelded by lightning--an illusion,  
And a sky like a pig's backside, an utter lack of  
attention.

But right now you are dumb.  
And I love your stupidity,  
The blind mirror of it. I look in  
And find no face but my own, and you think that's  
funny.  
It is good for me

To have you grab my nose, a ladder rung.  
One day you may touch what's wrong--  
The small skulls, the smashed blue hills, the  
godawful hush.  
Till then your smiles are found money.

Set the emotion expressed for a child here beside the lines  
quoted from "Brasilia," for example. Love and a sense of  
salvation on the one hand; hate and fear on the other. The polar  
emotions illustrate her ambivalent attitude toward children.

The ambivalence of many twentieth-century women toward  
marriage and childbirth may be caused in part by our Victorian  
heritage. Plath recognized a Victorianism in her attitude  
toward sex and sexual relations. She wrote The Bell Jar under  
the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. And in "Morning Song," written  
for her daughter, she describes herself as rising to feed her  
child "cow-heavy/And floral in my Victorian nightgown." This  
image reveals a kind of humorous embarrassment at the maternal  
capacities she is hiding under the prudish gown.

What then about childlessness? For Plath, childbirth is

a kind of martyrdom. A woman dies as a particular kind of woman when she bears a child, and she continues to die as the child feeds literally and metaphorically on her. What, then, about the woman who refuses to make this sacrifice?

. . .

This woman . . .  
Says she is a man, not a woman.

. . .

She hates

The thought of a baby--  
Stealer of cells, stealer of beauty--

She would rather be dead than fat.  
Dead and perfect, like Nefertit,

Hearing the fierce mask magnify  
The silver limbo of each eye

Where the child can never swim.  
Where there is only him, and him.

("The Fearful," The Observer: February 1963)

Plath sees childlessness as a kind of perfection, but perfection of a terrible nature because it is also death. The woman no longer sacrifices herself for the sake of life. The sacrifice is complete because all life is denied.

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.

. . .

. . .

Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no  
purpose  
The blood flood is the flood of love,

The absolute sacrifice.  
It means: no more idols but me,

Me and you.

. . .

("The Munich Mannequins": Ariel)

In "Edge" (Ariel), the mother takes back the gift of life and the gift of herself:

The woman is perfected.  
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,  
. . . .

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,  
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.  
She has folded

Them back into her body . . . .

In "Tulips" (Ariel), one of Plath's most popular poems, she uses a personal experience as a setting to express the complexities that the idea of childlessness has for her. Ted Hughes says she wrote "Tulips" after being hospitalized for an appendectomy in March of 1961. She had miscarried just a short time before this operation; probably the second hospital confinement triggered associations with death and birth. These tulips are "like an awful baby." There is something wild and dangerous about them. She wants to reject them because she says they "eat my oxygen." She wants to reject the tulips as she wants to reject the trappings of her life and the family she has:

Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage--  
My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;  
Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.

. . . .

I watched my tea-set, my bureaus of linen, my books  
Sink out of sight . . .

I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.

I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted

To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.  
How free it is, you have no idea how free--

. . .

It is what the dead close on, finally . . . .

Not tulips but death is the gift she wants, as in "A Birthday Present" (Ariel), but in both cases the irony is that the gift is life. What she finds in her rejection of the gift here is freedom, a kind of perfection. Her freedom is both wonderful and terrible because the price is so high. The woman must give up her man and her child that hook onto her, as well as her things, her possessions. And the ultimate price--and reward--is death. Just as it is "the mouths of corpses" that suck in the poem "Childless Woman" (Winter Trees).

In May of 1962 Plath finished her only dramatic work, "Three Women" (Winter Trees). It was produced by the BBC in August of that year. The setting for "Three Women" is "a maternity ward and round about." Three voices heard are: The Wife, The Secretary, and The Girl (these designations are omitted from the Winter Trees version, but they appear on other published scripts). Each voice captures an aspect of Plath's attitudes toward motherhood as revealed by her other work. The Wife, the first voice, believes she is ready for the ultimate experience of her life. She is shaken by the violence of her labor to exclaim: "There is no miracle more cruel than this," and "I am used"; but after

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the birth, she exults in her son.

The Second Voice, The Secretary, is the voice of the woman who loses her child and is, therefore, both mother and no mother. Reflecting on her loss, she says:

I did not look. But still the face was there,  
The face of the unborn one that loved its perfections,  
The face of the dead one that could only be perfect  
In its easy peace, could only keep holy so.

But her loss has left her empty, useless. By personifying this in terms of a woman who is characterized by her function outside the home, The Secretary, Plath may be suggesting that this fate, this loss is a punishment. The Secretary reassures herself that her husband will still love her in her "deformity." And she vows a kind of penance, a rededication to her domestic duties:

I shall be a heroine of the peripheral.  
I shall not be accused by isolate buttons,  
Holes in the heels of socks, the white mute faces  
Of unanswered letters, confined in a letter case.  
I shall not be accused, I shall not be accused.

The end of the drama finds this woman, true to her promise, "mending a silk slip," and reaffirming both her identity and her dedication to her husband: "I am a wife." She seems also to be anticipating a reward: another chance, another pregnancy.

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This woman describes herself in labor as being "dragged by the horses, by the iron hooves." "Ariel," one of Plath's most cited poems, is a poem which uses her experience of her horse running away with her as a metaphor for giving birth. Any woman who has undergone any kind of internal examination would recognize the aptness of the metaphor.

(I am indebted to Dr. Naomi Bluestone, M.D., for suggesting this interpretation.)

The Third Voice, The Girl, is not ready for her experience. Her attitude is one of extreme hostility to men in general for her predicament. When her "red, terrible girl" is born, The Girl remarks: "Her cries are hooks that catch and grate like cats./It is by these hooks she climbs to my notice." <sup>101</sup> The Girl rejects her child and re-establishes herself in her old life, which is college life, intellectual life. However, her "black gown is a little funeral."

Through the voices of the three women, then, Plath again explores women's fates and choices such as those represented by the fig tree. Because she did not die at twenty, she was forced to define her life in terms of the choices all women have to make. She feared that accepting traditional roles would stifle her creativity; but she believed, too, that missing out on basic experiences was another kind of death. Also, she was a perfectionist. A. Alvarez, who knew her and who has written about her life and death in The Savage God: A Study of Suicide (New York, 1972), says of her: "With the same intensity as she had succeeded as a straight A student, she immersed herself in her children, her riding, her beekeeping, even her cooking; everything had to be done well and to the fullest." She wanted to have it all; she feared she had failed at everything.

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Plath frequently uses the word "hook" with all of its ugly connotations in images describing maternal relationships. (See the quotations from "Tulips" or "Words for a Nursery" for other examples.)

In The Bell Jar, Esther expresses fear at the effect of motherhood on her ambitions: "I also remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems any more. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state." After the birth of her children, Plath discovered she still wanted to write but that frequently she could not. In order to find time for writing she had to arise at 4:00 and squeeze it into the hour or so before the babies woke. The results often did not please her. She recognized the conflict between intellectual and feminine creativity. She fancied the poems themselves were her children; but unfortunately these children were "Still-born" (Crossing the Water):

These poems do not live: it's a sad diagnosis.  
They grew their little toes and fingers well enough,  
Their little foreheads bulged with concentration.  
If they missed out on walking about like people  
It wasn't for any lack of mother love.

. . .

But they are dead, and their mother near dead with  
distraction,  
And they stupidly stare, and do not speak of her.

In "Two Sisters of Persephone" (Crossing the Water), she explores her conflict in a different way. In this poem she sets up two women who are exact opposites. One is a "wry virgin" who stays in her house and dedicates her life to "a mathematical machine." The other goes out into nature and lets her imagination



interpret the world. This woman, who sees the world poetically, is "the sun's bride" and "bears a king." Thus, the truly creative woman is the imaginative, poetic one, the really feminine one. The other "goes graveward . . . worm-husbanded, yet no woman."

Roles are exclusively maintained in bee society. Plath wrote a series of "bee" poems using their society and her experience with beekeeping as a way to express her frustration over her own roles. In the following stanzas from "Stings," she identifies with both the drones and the queen, and reveals the conflict between her domestic and her poetic, her queenly, selves:

I stand in a column

Of winged, unmiraculous women,  
Honey-drudgers.  
I am no drudge  
Though for years I have eaten dust  
And dried plates with my dense hair.

And seen my strangeness evaporate . . .

They thought death was worth it, but I  
Have a self to recover, a queen.  
Is she dead, is she sleeping?  
Where has she been,  
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?

Now she is flying  
More terrible than she ever was, red  
Scar in the sky, red comet  
Over the engine that killed her--  
The mausoleum, the wax house.

(Ariel)

But even had she wished it, the real children could not be folded back into her womb. They were there to contend with

along with the daily, routine, household chores. In addition, she was married to a poet, who presumably was writing, producing poetry, while she dusted and diapered.

In a short story called "The Wishing Box" (Atlantic: October 1964), she denounced what she had elsewhere termed "vacuous domestic life." This story suggests that such an existence is death for a woman's mind, while marriage leaves the man's intellect, his capacity for artistic creation, unimpaired. In "The Wishing Box," Agnes Higgins discovers that her husband Harold has a fabulous dream life. He is in the daily habit of parading his dreams before her. Meanwhile, Agnes' nights are dreamless; and she is jealous of Harold's abilities. Agnes discovers that the things around her depress her: "the Oriental rug, the Williamsburg-blue wallpaper, the gilded dragons on the Chinese vase on the mantle, the blue-and-gold medallion design of the upholstered sofa." She is trapped by the reality of her surroundings, and she has no imagination any more to envision changes. "She felt choked, smothered by these objects whose bulky pragmatic existence somehow threatened the deepest, most secret roots of her own ephemeral being." In order to escape from her world and from her lack of imagination, Agnes begins to read. "She raced through novels, women's magazines, newspapers, and even the anecdotes in her Joy of Cooking; she read travel brochures, home appliance circulars, the Sears Roebuck catalogues, the instructions of soap-flakes boxes, the blurbs on the backs of record jackets--" to no avail. Agnes turns to other of the

housewife's diversions: afternoon movies, TV, sherry. Neither do these stimulate her mind nor do they deaden her sense of loss, her sense of the void in her life. Agnes despairs at the vision of "her mind condemned to perfect vacancy. Without a single image of its own to ward off the crushing assault of smug, autonomous tables and chairs." So what is Agnes's answer to this dilemma? A box of fifty sleeping pills.

Usually Plath's poems with domestic settings are her most ominous poems. "Viciousness in the kitchen!" is the first line of "Lesbos," a poem which examines the relationship between two women largely in terms of their domestic situation. Birth and death are "cooking" in the kitchen setting of "A Birthday Present." In "The Detective" (Winter Trees), it is "the smell of years burning, here in the kitchen." There has been a death, here, but paradoxically:

There is no body in the house at all.  
There is the smell of polish, there are plush carpets.  
There is the sunlight, playing its blades,  
Bored hoodlum in a red room  
Where the wireless talks to itself like an elderly  
relative.

The pun in the first line of this stanza confirms the death, the absence of the body who should be there.

Did it come like an arrow, did it come like a knife?  
Which of the poisons is it?  
Which of the nerve-curlers, the convulsors? Did it  
electrify?

No, the poem answers itself: this is not the way death came,  
rather:

It is a case of vaporization.  
The mouth first, its absence reported

In the second year. It had been insatiable  
And in punishment was hung out like brown fruit  
To wrinkle and dry.

The breasts next.  
These were harder, two white stones.  
The milk came yellow, then blue and sweet as water.  
There was no absence of lips, there were two children,  
But their bones showed, and the moon smiled.

Then the dry wood, the gates,  
The brown motherly furrows, the white estate.  
We walk on air, Watson.  
There is only the moon, embalmed in phosphorus.  
There is only a crow in a tree. Make notes.

The deadly atmosphere, the withdrawal of love, the drain of the  
two children, the sexual atrophy--even ten years after her death,  
the poem is almost too painful.

It is paradoxical that she created the majority of her  
most powerful, most successful work out of the experiences and  
relationships she felt were stifling, even killing her. There is  
always the question of whether or not writing about the things  
that hurt makes the writer better able or less able to cope with  
those things. In Plath's case, the answer can never be known.  
Nor can it ever be known whether or not she chose (consciously  
or unconsciously) paths that would lead her deeper and deeper  
into a domestic labyrinth because she needed those subjects and  
those experiences and the emotions they stimulated in order to  
create her best work. All that can be known is that Plath, like  
Millay, chose to use these aspects of her life as the basic  
subjects or metaphors of a substantial portion of her work. She  
recognized that part of her power lay in the everyday. That

A certain minor light may still  
Leap incandescent  
Out of kitchen table or chair  
As if a celestial burning took  
Possession of the most obtuse objects now and then.  
(from "Black Rook in Rainy Weather": Crossing  
the Water)

Plath was both more aware of herself as a woman and more articulate than most women. Part of her schizophrenia was the tension within her between the Ms. Plath/Mrs. Hughes elements in her personality.

She finally achieved her promised death. In poems such as "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy," she intensified her feelings of victimization by poetically identifying with persecuted Jews. In both poems she uses not only Jewish persecution but her personal experience--she "confesses"--as a means to describe victimization in general, and female victimization in particular. In "Lady Lazarus," the persecutors are Herr Doctor, Herr Enemy, Herr God, Herr Lucifer. She emphasizes their masculinity. In "Daddy," the male persecutor against whom she rebels is not only her father but also her husband, the man she created as "a model" of her father. He is "a man with a Meinkampf look/ And a love of the rack and the screw." This is the "vampire" who drank her blood for "seven years," the length of her marriage. Plath blurs the separate identity of each man and of the Nazis just as she blurs the distinctions between herself as daughter and wife and the martyred Jews. In choosing her death weapon, the gas oven, she again united both the domestic and the historic in perfect symbolization.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONTEMPORARIES

I don't want  
to forget who I am, what has burned in me  
and hang limp and clean, an empty dress--  
(Denise Levertov, from "The Five-Day Rain":  
With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads)

This chapter will examine six living American women poets who write out of their own female experience: Gwendolyn Brooks, Denise Levertov, Anne Sexton, Erica Jong, Lyn Lifshin, and Marge Piercy. The work of these six poets is fairly representative, I believe, of much poetry currently being written by women in America. Therefore, I will survey their published works to date, pointing out what I take to be characteristic strengths and limitations in the work of American female poets writing today.

#### Gwendolyn Brooks

Men of careful turns, haters of forks in the road,  
The strain at the eye, that puzzlement, that awe--  
Grant me that I am human, that I hurt,  
That I can cry.

Not that I now ask alms, in shame gone hollow,  
Nor cringe outside the loud and sumptuous gate.  
Admit me to our mutual estate.

(from Part XV of "The Womanhood": Annie Allen)

Gwendolyn Brooks was born in Topeka, Kansas and educated at Wilson Junior College in Chicago where she now lives. She is

married and has two children. Brooks has not published a book of poems since 1964; since she is only 56, however, there is reason to hope she may yet publish more. Her books include A Street in Bronzeville, 1945; Annie Allen, 1949 (for which she won the Pulitzer prize); The Bean Eaters, 1960; Selected Poems, 1963; and In the Mecca, 1964. Brooks has been a steady but not especially prolific poet. The quality of her work is such that there can be no question of the Pulitzer being a token award to a black woman.

The most outstanding feature of Brooks's work is her ability to create people. She can portray poetically, either through dramatic monologues or through description, all kinds of people: white as well as black, male as well as female, rich as well as poor. She could people a town; in fact, she did poeple an urban housing development, The Mecca, in her last book. Brooks captures people by portraying their behavior, their speech, and especially their native, everyday surroundings.

In "The Lovers of the Poor" (The Bean Eaters), for example, Brooks is able to portray the antithetical worlds of very rich whites and very poor blacks primarily through her choice of domestic details. The following extractions, which constitute about one-third of the poem, capture its essence:

. . .  
Their guild is giving money to the poor.  
The worthy poor. The very very worthy  
And beautiful poor. Perhaps just not too swarthy?  
Perhaps just not too dirty nor too dim  
Nor--passionate. . . .

. . .  
But it's all so bad! and entirely too much for them.

The stench: the urine, cabbage, and dead beans,  
Dead porridges of assorted dusty grains,  
The old smoke, heavy diapers, and, they're told,  
Something called chitterlings. . . .

. . .  
And for that matter the general oldness. Old  
Wood. Old marble. Old tile, Old old old.  
Not homekind Oldness! Not Lake Forest, Glencoe.  
Nothing is sturdy, nothing is majestic,  
There is no quiet drama, no rubbed glaze, no.  
Unkillable infirmity of such  
A tasteful turn as lately they have left,  
Glencoe, Lake Forest, and to which their cars  
Must presently restore them. . . .

. . .  
They own Spode, Lowestoft, candelabra,  
Mantels, and hostess gowns, and sunburst clocks,  
Turtle soup, Chippendale, red satin "hangings,"  
Aubussons and Hattie Carnegie. They Winter  
In Palm Beach, cross the Water in June; attend,  
When suitable, the nice Art institute;  
Buy the right books in the best bindings; saunter  
On Michigan, Easter mornings, in sun or wind.  
Oh Squalor! This sick four-story hulk, this fibre  
With fissures everywhere! Why, what are bringings  
Of loathe-love largesse? What shall peril hungers  
So old old, what shall flatter the desolate?  
Tin can, blocked fire escape and chitterling  
And swaggering seeking youth and the puzzled wreckage  
Of the middle passage, and urine and stale shames  
And again, the porridges of the underslung  
And children children children. . . .

. . .

Brooks's sensibilities encompass both worlds equally well, and  
her portrayal of the white women here goes beyond mere Lady  
Bountiful stereotyping. The poem ends with a fine description  
of the ladies leaving the tenement:

Keeping their scented bodies in the center  
Of the hall as they walk down the hysterical hall,  
They allow their lovely skirts to graze no wall,  
Are off at what they manage of a canter,  
And, resuming all the clues of what they were,  
Try to avoid inhaling the laden air.

The life of the childless woman is contrasted with that



of a mother in "The Empty Woman" (from New Poems: Selected Poems). The technique used in "The Lovers of the Poor" is also apparent here. That is, details from each woman's very different kind of life are juxtaposed: the childless woman is "empty" but she has things: hats, combs, beauty-parlor hair. The mother has "wordful girls" and "war-boys":

The empty woman took toys!  
In her sisters' homes  
Were little girls and boys.

The empty woman had hats  
To show. With feathers. Wore combs  
In polished waves. Wooed cats

And pigeons. Shopped.  
Shopped hard for nephew-toys,  
Niece-toys. Made taffy. Popped

Popcorn and hated her sisters,  
Featherless and waveless but able to  
Mend measles, nag noses, blast blisters

And all day waste wordful girls  
And war-boys, and all day  
Say "Oh God!"--and tire among curls

And plump legs and proud muscle  
And blackened school-bags, babushkas, torn socks,  
And bouffants that bustle, and rustle.

"The mother" (A Street in Bronzeville) is important among Brooks's many portraits of women. Written in 1945, it is the first explicit poem about abortion I have found:

Abortions will not let you forget.  
You remember the children you got that you did not  
get,  
The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair,  
The singers and workers that never handled the air.  
You will never neglect or beat  
Then, or silence or buy with a sweet.

You will never wind up the sucking-thumb  
Or scuttle off ghosts that come.  
You will never leave them, controlling your luscious  
sigh,  
Return for a snack of them, with gobbling mother-eye.

I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of  
my dim killed children.  
I have contracted. I have eased  
My dim dears at the breasts they could never suck.  
I have said, Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized  
Your luck  
And your lives from your unfinished reach,  
If I stole your births and your names,  
Your straight baby tears and your games,  
Your stilted or lovely loves, your tumults, your  
marriages, aches, and your deaths,  
If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths,  
Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not  
deliberate.  
Though why should I whine,  
Whine that the crime was other than mine?--  
Since anyhow you are dead.  
Or rather, or instead,  
You were never made.  
But that too, I am afraid,  
Is faulty: oh, what shall I say, how is the truth to  
be said?  
You were born, you had body, you died.  
It is just that you never giggled or planned or cried.  
  
Believe me, I loved you all.  
Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I  
loved you  
All.

An aging woman is another woman Brooks successfully por-  
trays. In "A Sunset of the City" (The Bean Eaters), this woman  
says:

Already I am no longer looked at with lechery or love,  
My daughters and sons have put me away with marbles  
and dolls,  
Are gone from the house.  
My husband and lovers are pleasant or somewhat polite,  
And night is night.  
...

I find "When you have forgotten Sunday: the love story"

(A Street in Bronzeville) to be one of the most admirable love poems I have read. The speaker expresses her satisfaction with her domestic and sexual relationship with her man in plain, homely, but totally satisfying terms:

--And when you have forgotten the bright bedclothes  
on a Wednesday and a Saturday,  
And most especially when you have forgotten Sunday--  
When you have forgotten Sunday halves in bed,  
Or me sitting on the front-room radiator in the  
limping afternoon  
Looking off down the long street  
To nowhere,  
Hugged by my plain old wrapper of no-expectation  
And nothing-I-have-to-do and I'm-happy-why?  
And if-Monday-never-had-to-come--  
When you have forgotten that, I say,  
And how you swore, if somebody beeped the bell,  
And how my heart played hopscotch if the telephone  
rang;  
And how we finally went in to Sunday dinner,  
That is to say, went across the front room floor to  
the ink-spotted table in the southwest corner  
To Sunday dinner, which was always chicken and noodles  
Or chicken and rice  
And salad and rye bread and tea  
And chocolate chip cookies--  
I say, when you have forgotten that,  
When you have forgotten my little presentiment  
That the war would be over before they got to you;  
And how we finally undressed and whipped out the  
light and flowed into bed,  
And lay loose-limbed for a moment in the week-end  
Bright bedclothes,  
Then gently folded into each other--  
When you have, I say, forgotten all that,  
Then you may tell,  
Then I may believe  
You have forgotten me well.

Sometimes Brooks sums up a character in a single image as she does in "Gang Girls" (In the Mecca). "Mary," she writes of one of these girls, "is/a rose in a whisky glass." Or a condition, as she does marriage, in a couplet: "There are no swans or

swallows any more./The people settled for chicken and shut the doors" ("the parents: people like our marriage/Maxie and Andrew": Annie Allen).

In addition to creating believable people and giving realistic and basically objective insights into the condition of women, in particular, Brooks also uses the homely and common details of everyday life in extended metaphors in a manner reminiscent of the Puritans. Part II of "The Womanhood" (Annie Allen), for example, presents a lesson in "reaching" through her child's actions:

Life for my child is simple, and is good.  
He knows his wish. Yes, but that is not all.  
Because I know mine too.  
And we both want joy of undeeep and unabiding things,  
Like kicking over a chair or throwing blocks out of a  
window  
Or tipping over an icebox pan  
Or snatching down curtains or fingering an electric  
outlet  
Or a journey or a friend or an illegal kiss.  
No. There is more to it than that.  
It is that he has never been afraid.  
Rather, he reaches out and lo the chair falls with a  
beautiful crash,  
And the blocks fall, down on the people's heads,  
And the water comes slooshing sloppily out across the  
floor.  
And so forth.  
Not that success, for him, is sure, infallible.  
But never has he been afraid to reach.  
His lesions are legion.  
But reaching is his rule.

Brooks's faults are few. She has been criticised for occasionally writing in a pseudo-Millay manner, which is certainly

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not Brooks at her best. Her one consistent fault, however, is that her tone almost constantly borders on sentimentality. Brooks is a humanist, and she has great sympathy for all people. Her poems about children or childlessness or aging are always sympathetic and just skirting sentimentality. The "gobbling mother-eye" of "the mother" who aborted her children, for example, is dangerous; but Brooks knows when to leave something alone. And hers is not the sentimentality of the nineteenth century. It does not have that cloying sweetness, that flat sameness, that overly sincere tone. In her work, sentimentality is a forgivable flaw, and it would be a good experience to hear her voice again.

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Stanley Kunitz criticised her sonnet "Intermission" (Annie Allen) for this fault in "Bronze by Gold," Poetry, Vol. 76 (April 1950), 53-54. In 1963 a poem called "Callie Ford" (The Bean Eaters) still reveals this Millay-type voice:

It's a day for running out of town  
With a man whose eyes are brown.

We'll go where trees leap up out of hills  
And flowers are not planned.  
We'll be happy all our day.  
First, he must press my hand,  
In the afternoon discover my waist,  
At night my mouth, and ask for the taste.  
And he must call me "very sweet."  
And I must call him "clever."

We'll come back  
Together at dawn  
And hate each other forever.

Denise Levertov

In childhood dream-play, I was always  
the knight or squire, not  
the lady;  
quester, petitioner, win or lose, not  
she who was sought.  
The initial of quest or question  
branded itself long since on the flank  
of my Pegasus.  
Yet he always flies  
home to the present.  
(from "Relearning the Alphabet")

Denise Levertov was born in London in 1923, the year Edna St. Vincent Millay published her "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree." Levertov received no formal schooling but was educated at home. A war-bride, she and her American writer husband, Mitchell Goodman, came to the United States to live in 1948. Their son Nickolai was born the following year.

Levertov had published one volume of poetry, The Double Image (1946), before her marriage; but it was not until eleven years later--nine years after the birth of her son--that her second book, Here and Now (1957) was published. It seems highly probable that this long period of silence was related to her taking on the roles of wife and mother. Since 1957, no more than four years have ever elapsed between her books: Overland to the Islands (1958), With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads (1959), The Jacob's Ladder (1961), O Taste and See (1964), The Sorrow Dance (1966), Relearning the Alphabet (1970), To Stay Alive (1971), and Footprints (1972).

An early poem called "The Dogwood" (Overland to the Islands) suggests resignation to hum-drum domestic chores that

must have been typical of that period when she was not writing:

The sink is full of dishes. Oh well.  
Ten o'clock, there's no  
hot water.  
The kitchen floor is unswept, the broom  
has been shedding straws. Oh well.

The cat is sleeping, Nikolai is sleeping,  
Mitch is sleeping, early to bed,  
aspirin for a cold. Oh well.

No school tomorrow, someone for lunch,  
. . .

I could decide  
to hear some chamber music  
And today I saw--what?  
Well, some huge soft deep  
blackly gazing purple  
and red (and pale)  
anemones. Does that  
take my mind off the dishes?  
And dogwood besides.  
Oh well. Early to bed, and I'll get up  
early and put  
a shine on everything and write  
a letter to Duncan later that will shine too  
with moonshine. Can I make it? Oh well.

The speaker is grasping for something to have made the day worthwhile. The flowers do not quite make it, perhaps, but they seem to be the best life has to offer. The juxtaposition of the world of nature and the world of the house is reminiscent of Millay. In fact, much of Levertov's work is reminiscent of Millay.

Most reviews of Levertov's work group her with the Black Mountain poets--Olson, Creeley, Duncan. Although her poetry does bear resemblances to theirs and has been often published with

theirs, she never studied or taught at Black Mountain. Similarly, her debt to William Carlos Williams is frequently noted. His influence is apparent, of course, but the influence of other imagists might as easily be cited--for instance, that of H. D. And if Levertov's work is to be examined for influences or similarities to individuals or to schools, it makes as much or more sense to place her in the tradition of Millay.

Like Millay's liberated female consciousness which was something of a shock to her contemporaries, Levertov employs what might be called a liberated diction. The first half of the 60's was still a relatively conservative period for women poets, especially in terms of their diction; but Levertov was among the first to employ four-letter words poetically. In "Hypocrite Women," for example, she wrote:

. . .  
a white sweating bull of a poet told us

our cunts are ugly--why didn't we  
admit we have thought so too? (And  
what shame? They are not for the eye!)

No, they are dark and wrinkled and hairy,  
caves of the Moon . . .  
(O Taste and See)

Levertov is the only female poet I have read who uses "hell" and "damn" and "for God's sake" as if they were so much a part of her conversational vocabulary that she feels her more conversational poems would not sound like her unless these words and phrases were also part of her poetic diction.

More importantly, Levertov uses domesticity in the same



ways as Millay. Both see correlations between simple commonplace situations and objects and larger, more lasting, more important concerns. Levertov's best poems are usually ones that make such correlations rather than the ones that employ liberated diction.

Levertov has the reputation on the poetry circuit of being tough. She and her husband both have nationally visible reputations as militant revolutionaries who have helped make war against war in the American streets. Therefore, it is perhaps surprising that Levertov's poems are often very delicate, as delicate as the sound of tulip petals falling ("The Tulips": The Jacob's Ladder). She is extremely perceptive and sensitive to the life around her and to its significance. Like the wife in Millay's "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" sequence, Levertov needs to transform the everyday into something magical. Seen with mystical vision, small things are secret signs, notes from the gods or from the fates. The broom vendor who passes the door just as a new broom is needed may be "one of the Hidden Ones" ("From the Roof": The Jacob's Ladder); the unusually cool flesh of her husband's body in bed next to hers portends sinister changes in the relationship, possibly separation or even death ("Clouds": The Jacob's Ladder). She describes the way her vision (and poetry) work in "Pleasures" (With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads):

I like to find  
what's not found  
at once, but lies

within something of another nature,  
in repose, distinct.

. . .

Joy is the key word in much of Levertov's poetry, and she equates being "in joy" with being "in love" ("Joy": The Sorrow Dance). She finds this joy in small things in nature or in the home. The following lines taken from several of the seven parts of "Matins" (The Jacob's Ladder) contain her definition of joy-- the recognition of the known, the authentic, the true:

. . . .

The authentic! I said  
rising from the toilet seat.  
The radiator in rhythmic knockings  
spoke of the rising steam.  
The authentic, I said  
breaking the handle of my hairbrush as I  
brushed my hair in  
rhythmic strokes: That's it,  
that's joy, it's always  
a recognition, the known  
appearing fully itself, and  
more itself than one knew.

. . . .

Marvelous Truth, confront us  
at every turn,  
in every guise, . . .  
. . . shadow,  
cloud  
of breath on the air,

dwell  
in our crowded hearts  
our steaming bathrooms, kitchens full of  
things to be done, the  
ordinary streets.

Thrust close your smile  
that we know you, terrible joy.

Again, this is the way Levertov's best poetry works: giving to the reader the recognition of "the known/appearing fully itself, and/more itself than one knew."

Levertov is an autobiographical poet, a personal poet; but not a confessional one. She uses her own experience as woman, wife, mother as the subject of poems but usually as representative of universal experiences, seldom as individual or unique ones. Thus, her poems "The Son" (The Sorrow Dance) and "He-Who-Came-Forth" (Relearning the Alphabet) are poems about Nickolai only in as much as he is representative of all, or at least most, boys. More interesting, however, are her poems about the condition of being a woman and about marriage.

"The Marriage" (Here and Now), the second part of which follows, is the first of Levertov's poems about marriage:

I want to speak to you.  
To whom else should I speak?  
It is to you who make  
a world to speak of.  
In your warmth the  
fruits ripen--all the  
apples and pears that grow  
on the south wall of my  
head. If you listen  
it rains for them, then  
they drink. If you  
speak in response  
the seeds  
jump into the ground.  
Speak or be silent: your silence  
will speak to me.

The concept of marriage as communication, of communion, is basic to most of Levertov's poems on the subject. Here the marriage partner provides ideal responses--even his silence is communication. In other of her poems, such as "The Ache of Marriage" (O Taste and See), such rapport is desired but lacking:

The ache of marriage:

thigh and tongue, beloved,  
are heavy with it,  
it throbs in the teeth

We look for communion  
and are turned away, beloved,  
each and each

It is leviathan and we  
in its belly  
looking for joy, some joy  
not to be known outside it

two by two in the ark of  
the ache of it.

In another poem "About Marriage" (O Taste and See), Levertov,  
like Millay, portrays a speaker who resists being totally  
possessed. Such independence is compatible with Levertov's  
view of marriage as a state where two equal, responsible, and  
separate individuals communicate: in shared communication,  
neither party is effaced or possessed. "About Marriage" opens  
with the statement:

Don't lock me in wedlock, I want  
marriage, an  
encounter--

It then describes the speaker's encounter with several beautiful  
birds which, she says, "saw me and/let me be/near them." Relating  
this experience to the opening, the poem concludes:

It's not  
irrelevant:  
I would be  
met

and meet you  
so,  
in a green

airy space, not  
locked in.

Leverlov portrays conditions in women's lives, in their natures, that tend to infuriate many other women writers: that women are passive--more acted upon than acting; that women are victims--limited by circumstances outside their control or by their own natures. But Leverlov is more willing to accept or make do than most of her contemporaries.

For instance, "Stepping Westward" (The Sorrow Dance) is a poem in which the speaker accepts the inconsistencies of being a woman:

. . . .

If woman is inconstant,  
good. I am faithful to

ebb and flow, I fall  
in season and now

is a time of ripening.  
If her part

is to be true,  
a north star,

good, I hold steady  
. . . .

There is no savor  
more sweet, more salt

than to be glad to be  
what, woman,

and who, myself,  
I am, . . . .

The woman looks for compensation, for small joys that may paradoxically accompany pain:

If I bear burdens

they begin to be remembered  
as gifts, goods, a basket

of bread that hurts  
my shoulders but closes me

in fragrance. I can  
eat as I go.

This concluding image of acceptance and transcendence is typical  
of Levertov's vision and of her philosophy.

"The Pulse" (The Sorrow Dance) is another poem that some  
women believe deals with the nature of woman and her condition. 103

It combines symbolism reminiscent of H. D. with a more personal

"I" narrator:

Sealed inside the anemone  
in the dark, I knock my head  
on steel petals  
curving inward around me.

Somewhere the edict is given:  
petals, relax.  
Delicately they arch over backward.  
All is opened to me--

. . . .

. . . .  
But my feet are weighted:

only my seafern arms  
my human hands  
my fingers tipped with fire  
sway out into the world.

Fair is the world.  
I sing. The ache  
up from heel to knee  
of the weights

gives to the song its  
ground bass.  
And before the song

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See Nancy Jo Hoffman, "Reading Women's Poetry: The  
Meaning and Our Lives," College English, XXXIV (October 1972),  
48-62.

attains even a first refrain

the petals creak and  
begin to rise.  
They rise and recur  
to a bud's form

and clamp shut.  
I wait in the dark.

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The "I" is a passive victim of the flower. Although she  
reaches out to the world, she is powerless to escape or to force  
the anemone to open against its will. She can only "wait in the  
dark." Although this poem seems to me primarily to be about the  
artist's--the "singer's"--problems (about struggles for inspira-  
tion and about the discrepancy between what one wants to produce  
and what one can produce), it can be read on another level as a  
problem general to women. This is how one college English teacher  
and her students have interpreted the poem, at any rate: as the  
passive acceptance by women of the restrictions put upon them by  
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the world. Such a reading is reinforced by another poem  
which Levertov calls "A Defeat in the Green Mountains," which  
is published in her last book. This poem deals with a similar  
condition but does so more realistically than the allegorical  
poem "The Pulse." This "defeat," however, seems allegorical too:

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Although the sex of the speaker is not defined in the  
poem, I am referring to the speaker as "she" in this discussion  
because I feel that the poem is primarily an attempt by its  
author to describe a personal experience.

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Hoffman.

On a dull day she goes  
to find the river,  
accompanied by two  
unwilling children, shut in  
among thorns, vines, the  
long grass

stumbling, complaining, the  
blackflies biting them,  
but persists, drawn  
by river-sound close beyond  
the baffling scratchy thicket

and after a half-hour they emerge  
upon the water

                    flowing by  
both dark and clear.  
    A space and  
    a movement crossing  
    their halted movement.  
But the river is deep

the mud her foot stirs up  
frightens her; the kids are  
scared and angry. No way  
to reach the open fields over there.  
Back then:  
swamp underfoot, through the

perverse thickets, finding  
a path finally to the  
main road--defeated,  
to ponder the narrow  
depth of the river,  
its absorbed movement past her.

Here the woman (and the children) are as entrapped, as unable to  
attain the world, the open field, as the "I" of "The Pulse."

In the late 60's, joy disappeared from Levertov's work.

In several interviews she gave at the beginning of the present  
decade, she discussed her loss of joy and her new melancholic  
state. During this time, too, she abandoned her usual themes--

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See "Craft Interview with Denise Levertov," New York  
Quarterly, September 1971, pp. 9-25; and "Denise Levertov: An  
Interview," Little Magazine, Fall-Winter 1971-72, pp. 42-57.



male/female relationships, nature--and turned to anti-war poetry, to propaganda, much as Edna St. Vincent Millay had done during World War II. But Levertov's last book, Footprints, is a mixture of anti-war poems and poems about nature or female experience. She recalls joy in "The Good Dream," and the poem "Brass Tacks" in this volume is a return to her earlier concerns. It is a series of seven small vignette-type poems, each one portraying some small common everyday occurrence or object that momentarily brightens someone's day. For example, part III tells of a woman who is often away from her own home. It begins:

Yes, in strange kitchens  
I know where to find the forks  
  
and among another woman's perfume bottles  
I can find the one that suits me.

. . .

Perhaps in her next book, Levertov will make it all the way back from propaganda to poetry.

#### Anne Sexton

A woman who writes feels too much,  
those trances and portents!  
as if cycles and children and islands  
weren't enough; as if mourners and gossips  
and vegetables were never enough.  
(from "The Black Art": All My Pretty Ones)

Anne Sexton was born in Newton, Massachusetts in 1928. She is married and has two daughters. After the birth of her first child, she suffered a breakdown and was committed to an institution. After her recovery, she began to write poetry. She was a

friend of Sylvia Plath; both she and Plath studied together under Robert Lowell. Sexton has published six books of poetry; and her play, Mercy Street, was produced in the American Theater in 1969-1970 but never published. Her books include: To Bedlam and Part Way Back, 1960; All My Pretty Ones, 1962; Live or Die, 1966; Love Poems, 1967; Transformations, 1971; and The Book of Folly, 1972. She won the Pulitzer prize in 1967 for Live or Die.

There are many similarities between Sexton and Plath, although it is impossible to know who influenced whom in the beginning when they were both working under Lowell. In an interview, Sexton admitted to being influenced by Plath's Ariel poems,<sup>107</sup> especially, she said, the "hate" poems such as "Daddy." Frequently, Sexton's poems echo Plath's in intensity, in tone and technique, and sometimes in expression.

Like Plath, Sexton usually portrays women, herself included, as victims. In the later poems, the man is sometimes alluded to as a Nazi oppressor, as in Plath's famous "Daddy."<sup>108</sup> "Mr. Panzer-man," for example, is the lover in "The Wedlock"; "Oh my Nazi,/with your S. S. sky-blue eyes" is the lover in

<sup>107</sup>  
Barbara Kelves, "Anne Sexton," Paris Review, Summer 1971, pp. 158-191.

<sup>108</sup>  
Published in the New Republic, December 11, 1971, p. 23 but not collected in the latest book.

"Loving the Killer" (Love Poems). This lover drags the speaker off by his "Nazi hook" in the second poem in "Eighteen Days Without You" (Love Poems). And death is "Herr Doktor" in "The Doctor of the Heart" (The Book of Folly).

Like Plath's "In Plaster," Sexton's "The Addict" (Live or Die) uses a metaphor of physical dependency to describe marriage. Writing about addiction to pills, Sexton says:

I like them more than I like me.  
Stubborn as hell, they won't let go.  
It's a kind of marriage.

Sexton also intimates, as does Plath, that her husband is a surrogate father and that her relationship with her father is central to her emotional and psychological problems.

Although Sexton describes herself as a "Victorian teenager at heart,"<sup>109</sup> some of her poems seem to be planned to shock. Her first book contains a poem, "The Exorcists," about (her own) abortion; and later books contain poems which, for the 60's, were eyecatching, to say the least. See "Menstruation at Forty" in Live or Die, or "In Celebration of My Uterus," or "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator" in Love Poems, for example. Sexton boasted that her poem "That Day" (Love Poems) was the only

"Interview with Anne Sexton," Patricia Marx, Hudson Review, XVIII (Winter 1965-66), 566. Again, compare Plath's identification with Victorianisms.

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poem written about an erection.

This desire to shock is apparent in some of her images as well as in her subject matter. She uses some sexual and scatological images. The results are sometimes effective, sometimes failures. In "Flee on Your Donkey" (Live or Die), she describes her return to the madhouse with an unusual and suggestive domestic image:

I have come back  
recommitted  
fastened to the wall like a bathroom plunger.

In "Man and Wife" (Live or Die), the couple are "like strangers in a two-seater outhouse,/eating and squatting together." Sexton is not afraid to take risks, but sometimes the results turn out rather badly. "The Break" (Love Poems), for example, contains a particularly far-fetched simile. In this poem, the speaker while recovering from a broken hip looks around her hospital room and observes:

My one dozen roses are dead.  
They have ceased to menstruate. They hang  
there like little dried up blood clots.

This is reminiscent of Plath's "Tulips," but here the menopausal roses are merely unnecessary decorations while Plath's tulips are

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"A Bird Full of Bones": Anne Sexton--A Vicit and a Reading," John J. Mood, Chicago Review, XXIII (1971), 111. Mood says he informed her of Rilke's "phallic poems," But her mistake shows that she was concerned with being an originator. Since the 70's have grown blase about sexual subjects, it is her religious poetry (see "The Jesus Papers" section of The Book of Folly, for example) which now seems to be shocking.

metaphorically an integral part of her poem. In Transformations especially, Sexton seems to be playing a game with similes, in each poem trying to outdo the similes in the last. In this book, a retelling and embellishment of the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, the technique works fairly well because the outlandish nature of many of the similes adds to the surreal and ludicrous effect of the stories. Thus, in "The Little Peasant," the unfaithful wife's "secret was as safe/as a fly in an outhouse"; and the red shoes of "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" were "as worn as an old jock strap."

Sexton frequently uses a nursery-rhyme technique to undercut the sentimentality or obscenity that is a possible danger in many of her topics. This technique is made up of short lines, much use of rhyme, allusions to fairy story characters and incidents, and childish images. This technique is especially evident in "The Abortion" (All My Pretty Ones):

Somebody who should have been born is gone.

Just as the earth puckered its mouth,  
each bud puffing out from its knot,  
I changed my shoes, and then drove south.

Up past the Blue Mountains, where  
Pennsylvania humps on endlessly,  
wearing, like a crayoned cat, its green hair,

its roads sunken in like a gray washboard;  
where, in truth, the ground cracks evilly,  
a dark socket from which the coal has poured,

Somebody who should have been born is gone.

the grass as bristly and stout as chives,  
and me wondering when the ground would break,  
and me wondering how anything fragile survives;

up in Pennsylvania, I met a little man,  
not Rumpelstiltskin, at all, at all . . .  
he took the fullness that love began.

Returning north, even the sky grew thing  
like a high window looking nowhere.  
The road was as flat as a sheet of tin.

Somebody who should have been born is gone.

Yes, woman, such logic will lead  
to loss without death. Or say what you meant,  
you coward . . . this baby that I bleed.

In this instance, the introduction of childish details such as  
the "green hair" that is "like a crayoned cat" and Rumpelstiltskin  
in a poem about the aborting of a child is particularly ironic.

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Sexton writes poems that affirm love but not marriage.

She ridicules living happily ever after, even if possible, as a  
boring condition, "a kind of coffin" ("The White Snake":

Transformations). Sex is not enough to make a successful marriage,  
she implies in "The Farmer's Wife" (To Bedlam and Part Way Back),  
one of her most insightful poems:

From the hodge porridge  
of their country lust,  
their local life in Illinois,  
where all their acres look  
like a sprouting broom factory,  
they name just ten years now  
that she has been his habit;  
as again tonight he'll say

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Her poems increasingly hint that her own marriage is  
breaking or broken, although she has declared that she needs her  
husband, her therapist, and her children in order to define her  
sense of her own identity. (Paris Review, Summer 1971, p. 176.)

honey bunch let's go  
and she will not say how there  
must be more to living  
than this brief bright bridge  
of the raucous bed or even  
the slow braille touch of him  
like a heavy god grown light,  
that old pantomime of love  
that she wants although  
it leaves her still alone,  
built back again at last,  
mind's apart from him, living  
her own self in her own words  
and hating the sweat of the house  
they keep when they finally lie  
each in separate dreams  
and then how she watches him,  
still strong in the blowzy bag  
of his usual sleep while  
her young years bungle past  
their same marriage bed  
and she wishes him cripple, or poet,  
or even lonely, or sometimes,  
better, my lover, dead.

In "The Housewife" (All My Pretty Ones), she describes the intimate relationship some women have with their domestic role and the difference in how men and women identify with their domestic environments:

Some women marry houses.  
It's another kind of skin; it has a heart,  
a mouth, a liver and bowel movements.  
The walls are permanent and pink.  
See how she sits on her knees all day,  
faithfully washing herself down.  
Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah  
into their fleshy mothers.  
A woman is her mother.  
That's the main thing.

Sexton's more personal poems reveal, however, that she is not one of the housewives who identify themselves closely with their domestic roles. She has great difficulty accepting her

female nature. In "Consorting with Angels" (Live or Die) she reveals a suicidal wish to be an angel, "a people apart," because, she says:

I was tired of being a woman  
tired of the spoons and the pots,  
tired of my mouth and my breasts,  
tired of the cosmetics and the silks.  
There were still men who sat at my table,  
circled around the bowl I offered up.  
The bowl was filled with purple grapes  
and the flies hovered in for the scent  
and even my father came with his white bone.  
But I was tired of the gender of things.

. . .

She wishes to reject her femininity because it attracts predators--men.

Also, for Sexton, the ultimate indignity and horror is aging, becoming an old woman. The crone in "Woman with Girdle" (All My Pretty Ones) is physically repulsive and absurd:

Your midriff sags toward your knees;  
your breasts lie down in air,  
their nipples as uninvolved  
as warm starfish.  
. . .  
Moving, you roll down the garment,  
down that pink snapper and hoarder,  
as your belly, soft as pudding,  
slops into the empty space;  
down, over the surgeon's careful mark,  
down over hips, those head cushions  
and mouth cushions,  
slow motion like a rolling pin,  
over crisp hairs, that amazing field  
that hides your genius from your patron;  
over thighs, thick as young pigs,  
over knees like saucers,  
over calves, polished as leather,  
down toward the feet.

. . .

Parent/child relationships are also extremely important



subjects for Sexton. She reveals terrible guilt about her relationship to her parents as well as to her children. Sexton's mother blamed her daughter's suicide attempt for the cancer from which she died. Sexton was apparently involved in incestuous relations with her father. And she gave her first child to her mother-in-law to raise for its first four years of life because she was mentally unfit to care for the child. Sexton began to write about these subjects partly for therapeutic purposes. But guilt begets guilt. Her short story "The Letting Down of the Hair" (Transformations) suggests that she feels guilty about her poems because they expose so much, but that the public demands this kind of confessional writing from her. The speaker in this Rapunzel-like story is a slave to her long hair which represents both the experience poems are made of and guilt over using that experience.

Live or Die contains several fine poems for and about her daughters such as "Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman," "A Little Uncomplicated Hymn," "Your Face on the Dog's Neck," and "Pain for a Daughter." In the latter, the child, physically injured, cries: "Oh my God, help me!" And the speaker poignantly observes this turning to God, "Where a child would have cried Mama!/Where a child would have believed Mama!"

Six poems make up a section entitled "The Death of the Fathers" in The Book of Folly. "Oysters," the first of the series, is perhaps Sexton's most successful "father" poem because

she has found such an effective metaphor for suggesting an abnormal degree of sexuality in the father/daughter relationship:

Oysters we ate,  
sweet blue babies,  
twelve eyes looked up at me,  
running with lemon and Tabasco.  
I was afraid to eat this father-food  
and Father laughed  
and drank down his martini,  
clear as tears.  
It was a soft medicine  
that came from the sea into my mouth,  
moist and plump.  
I swallowed.  
It went down like a large pudding.  
Then I ate one o'clock and two o'clock,  
Then I laughed and then we laughed  
and let me take note--  
there was a death,  
the death of childhood  
there at the Union Oyster House  
for I was fifteen  
and eating oysters  
and the child was defeated.  
The woman won.

Anne Sexton is a poet in whose work Sylvia Plath's influence lives, perhaps too evidently. But Sexton is an experimenter and originator in her own right. Her use of female sexual and domestic experience as subject and metaphor have gone daringly beyond the usual boundaries. She understands that her subjects are risky--some sentimental, some possibly offensive to her audience. She attempts to find new techniques of expression to deal with them, such as using suggestive metaphors or using a style unusual to the subject.

Erica Jong

I'm good at interiors.  
Gossip, sharpening edges, kitchen poems--  
& have no luck at all with maps.  
It's because of being a woman  
& having everything inside.  
(from "Flying You Home")

Beware of the man who denounces women writers:  
his penis is tiny & cannot spell.  
(from "17 Warnings in Search of a Feminist Poem":  
The Nation, April 5, 1971)

There is little personal information available about Erica Jong other than that she was born in New York City, is a graduate of Barnard and Columbia Universities, and is divorced. Fruits & Vegetables, her only book to date, was published in 1971. In this book, Jong treats a variety of subjects. Prominent among them are hilariously bitter poems about reactions to women who are or who want to be poets and satires on female foibles, especially vanity.

Jong's poems are unlike those of almost any other woman writing today. They are filled with surprising images and ribald humor. For example, the third part of her prose poem "Arse Poetica" plays with the analogy commonly made between artistic creation and procreation. Jong makes a literal comparison of the artistic and the procreative acts; the result is outrageous but funny:

Once the penis has been introduced into the poem, the poet lets herself down until she is sitting on the  
muse  
with her legs outside him. He need not make any motions at all. The poet sits upright & raises & lowers her  
body

rhythmically until the last line is attained. She  
may pause  
in her movements & may also move her pelvis & abdomen  
forward & back or sideways, or with a circular cork-  
screw  
motion. This method yields exceptionally acute images  
& is, indeed, often recommended as yielding the summit  
of aesthetic enjoyment. Penetration is at its deep-  
est. Con-  
ception, however, is less apt than with other attitudes.

This position is also suitable when the muse is tired  
or  
lacking in vigor since the poet plays the active role.  
Pene-  
tration is deepest when the poet's body makes an angle  
of 45 degrees with the muse's. A half-erect muse will  
remain in position when this attitude is adopted since  
he cannot slip out of the poem.

A kind of parody of marriage manuals, this poem is typical of  
Jong's risk taking. She uses the most sexual aspect of the  
analogy between creation and procreation; and if the humor did not  
work, the poem would be offensive.

Jong's poems about women poets are militant but militant  
in a new way. They are angry and at the same time humorous. She  
combines the hostility of Sylvia Plath with the wit of Edna St.  
Vincent Millay, but the resultant tone is unique. Her poem "Bitter  
Pills for the Dark Ladies" compares the condition of the woman  
who wants to write poetry to that of a black:

. . . .

Ambition bites. Bite back.  
(It's almost useless.) Suppose yourself born  
half black, half Jewish in Missis-  
sippi, & with one leg

You get the Idear?  
Jus' remember you got no rights. Anything go wrong  
they gonna roun' you up & howl "Poetess!"  
(sorta like "nigra!") then kick the shit outa you

sayin': You got Natural Rhythm (28 days)  
so why you wanna mess aroun'?

Words bein' slippery & poetry bein'  
mos'ly a matter of balls,  
men what gives in to the lilt and lift of words  
(o love o death o organ tones o dickey!)  
is "Cosmic." You is "Sentimental."  
So dance in your Master's bed (or thesis) & shut  
yo' mouth. Ain't you happiest there?

If they let you out it's as Supermansaint  
played by S. Poitier with Ph.D.<sup>2</sup> & a buttndown fly  
washed whiter than any other on the block.  
& the ultimate praise is always a question of nots:  
viz. not like a woman  
viz. "certainly not another 'poetess'"  
meanin'

she got a cunt but she don't talk funny  
& he's a nigger but he don't smell funny

& the only good poetess is a dead.

Jong's bitterness is a reaction against the discouragement, disparagement, and, at best, patronization she has encountered in her own experience as a writer. (See her article "The Housewife as Artist/The Artist as Housewife," MS, December 1972, pp. 64+.) In the epigraph to her poem "The Commandments" she reports the conversation of a male poet as follows: "You don't really want to be a poet. First of all, if you're a woman, you have to be three times as good as any of the men. Secondly, you have to fuck everyone. And thirdly, you have to be dead." And her poem "The Book" projects through a dream the (male) reaction to a woman who dares disturb the literary universe:

I float down the spiral stairs  
of the old apartment.  
At the dining room table sit

my six ex-analysts, two brokers,  
& five professors,  
considering my book.  
They dip the pages of the manuscript in water,  
to see if it will last.

From where I watch, the sheets look black.

They discuss my sexual hang-ups.  
Why do I write about women  
when, after all, they're men?  
They enumerate my debts, losses,  
& the lies I've told; the red lights  
I have passed, the men I've kissed.

They examine a lock of my hair for bleach.

Finally, muttering, they rise & yawn in chorus.  
They decide to repossess my typewriter, my legs,  
my Phi Beta Kappa key, one breast,  
any children I may have,  
& my espresso machine.

My book, of course, is through.  
Already the pages have dissolved like toilet paper.

. . .

Jong's satires about female hang-ups, especially about female vanity, both ridicule and sympathize with women. She is one of the women who, as she says in her article, "can't believe in her existence past 30"; one of the women who, as she writes in the poem "Aging," are "hooked . . . on wrinkle creams." But Jong is an advocate for accepting what is natural. In "Aging," she describes this as "opening yourself/" and "letting the years make love the only way (poor blunderers)/they know." <sup>112</sup> In part I of "The Objective Woman," she offers sometimes ironic,

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It is, again, typical of Jong that she describes aging in terms of a sexual metaphor.

sometimes sympathetic, "praise" to American women for a long list of items. This list includes artificial or superficial gear which women affect mainly to enhance their appearance, such as: "electric purple sunglasses," "cherryfrost lips," "candied brandy toenails," "deodorized armpits and sprayed and powdered crotches," and "shoes which hurt and hats which are unreturnable." But it also includes some conditions with which women are more or less saddled or with which they must contend, such as: "their vacuum cleaners which howl with their own voiceless rage," and "shopping carts and stirrups and ten-cent rest rooms."

The woman under the drier in part IV of "The Objective Woman" is, of course, far from "the first female American astronaut" as Jong ironically characterizes her:

Cleaned & peeled & sealed  
down to her fingertips,  
unable to touch  
or smell herself,  
her capsule stuffed  
with thumbed copies  
of "Vogue" & "Bazaar,"  
her urine siphoned off  
into the classified files  
of the CIA,  
her hair standing  
weightlessly on end,  
wind whipping  
around her helmeted ears,  
the first female American astronaut  
is being launched!

. . .

But Jong never merely ridicules; she ends the poem with implied sympathy for this woman whose only appreciative audience is her homosexual hairdresser:

Solitary mute,  
always awaiting  
the prince for whom  
it will be worthwhile  
to shake the meteors  
out of her hair.  
He comes.  
He combs her out.  
He's gay.

Some of Jong's poems reveal determination to control her own destiny. Such control has traditionally been difficult for women because, to some extent, most of them have been at the mercy of their bodies and of men. The poem "Gardener" (MS, March 1973), for example, expresses this determination:

I am in love with my womb  
& jealous of it.

. . .

I imagine the inside  
of my womb to be  
the color of poppies  
& bougainvillaea  
(though I've never seen it).

But I fear the barnacle  
which might latch on  
& not let go  
& I fear the monster  
who might grow  
to bite the flowers  
& make them swell & bleed.

So I keep my womb empty  
& full of possibility.

Each month  
the blood sheets down  
like good red rain.

I am the gardener.  
Nothing grows without me.

Unlike Sylvia Plath, Jong does not express in her poetry an ambiva-



lent attitude toward children. The fear of the "barnacle," the "monster," expressed here is Jong's usual attitude. In "Artichoke, after Child" (read "artist" for "artichoke") she writes that with the core (read afterbirth) it is necessary "to remove all pieces of ambition."

Jong's book contains few poems about familial relationships. On the whole, her poems are less personal than many by her contemporaries; but they are reflective of deep concern with the business of being female. Jong is an angry young woman; but her feminism is expressed in a new voice, a voice at once bitchy and compassionate.

Lyn Lifshin

the other night  
one man pulled  
me from some  
one like meat  
on sale

someone else  
said lyn youve got  
to make each  
poem each  
man matter more

as if it was  
the last one,  
dont spread  
yourself so

thin. . . .

(from "Who Is It Coming Back": The Wormwood Review, Vol. XII, No. 3, 1972)

Lyn Lifshin is a young poet about whom nothing biographical has so far appeared. She is not included in Who's Who in

American Women nor in the biographical encyclopedias that deal with contemporary authors. She herself does not volunteer information of a personal nature to the contributor's notes of the various small magazines in which she is currently omnipresent.

After returning from two weeks at a writers' conference in the summer of 1971, I discovered that Lifshin had been present. Although I must have spent a dozen or so hours together with her in a moderately small group of people, I did not know she was there; nor do pictures of her I have seen since ring any bells. She was given no recognition by the staff of the conference and apparently claimed none although at least two of her small booklets had been published by that time. Although she thus appears to have a retiring or circumspect public front, she comes across very strongly in many of her poems. In fact, she might be called an exhibitionist or even a literary prostitute. What Sexton began, Lifshin is finishing: she uses female sexual experiences in many of her poems seemingly only for the purpose of shocking the reader or perhaps to sell the poems. Perhaps she has solved what many women see as an almost unsolvable problem--how to attract and please male editors; and poetry editors are, of course, predominantly male. But I have mentioned her to women poets of my acquaintance and they detest her.

Lifshin is an extremely prolific writer; her poems are currently appearing everywhere. Her books include: Why Is the House Dissolving?, 1969; Leaves and Night Things, 1970; Black

Apples, 1971; lady lyn, 1971; and Tentacles, Leaves, 1972. And she has at least four more books either in press or scheduled.

Many of Lifshin's poems contain fairly explicit descriptions of sexual acts. Most of these poems are written from the first person point of view making them autobiographical or confessional or at least giving them that appearance. Thus, Lifshin is, or has created a persona who is, what is currently known as a swinger. Tentacles, Leaves, for example, is a series of poems that present a story of an "Easy Rider" type of lover who comes to live with the narrator. Describing one event of this affair, the narrator says:

next morning he  
poured chocolate  
in my cunt  
and ate it and  
talked about  
going to montana

Although some Lifshin's poems might be termed erotic, others such as "Mustache" (Black Apples) might be termed merely vulgar:

I was thinking  
of it this  
morning, those  
marvelous hairs that  
curl around your words  
  
and how they smelled with  
frost all over  
in the mountains  
  
And yes especially of that  
time on the floor  
looking like the  
middle part of a thick  
leggy bug I could

just see  
above my belly, moist and  
floating up  
asked

is this  
making your blood glow

Lifshin seemingly has written about every conceivable kind of sexual partner. "I Don't Want Your Black Riding My Bones" (Black Apples) seems to be about the rejection of a black lover: "I don't have to/keep balling midnight," the narrator says. "To Poem" (Ibid.) is about a man who gives come-on signals only as long as it is impossible to go any further. The poem concludes:

and now bastard  
alone with me finally  
the chance to  
scares you off

"For a Friend" (Ibid.) is a similar poem, one about a casual encounter with a man who

got into my skirt  
and blood  
before I knew  
your name and then  
wanted to be  
mostly friends

Some of Lifshin's poems accurately describe sexual behavior. But few of these make any kind of statement, that is, few go beyond the surface level. They do not even reveal any particular sensitivity to language. Some are personal to the point of being private. In many, nothing happens; and they are simply boring. Lifshin is not a good self critic, and she is published too easily. If her popularity is not merely a fad, she may

someday regret many of the poems which are being accepted for publication. It is not, however, that Lifshin has no talent. She has written good poems, some of which always appear under the same name: "Family." She is interested in the strange and the sensational, in the folklore of different regions, and in the historical. Some of her poems dealing with these subjects are successful. And some of her poems that are concerned with women and their experiences in a more general way seem to work better than those written in the first person. "Waiting, the Hallways Under Her Skin Thick with Dreamchildren" (Why Is the House Dissolving?) is one example:

Lace grows in her eyes like  
fat weddings,  
she is pretty, has been baking  
bisquits of linen to stuff into his mouth  
all her life,  
waiting for him. The hallways  
under her skin are thick with dreamchildren.

Who he is hardly matters, her rooms  
stay for him,

her body crying to be taken  
with rings and furniture, tight behind doors  
in a wave of green breath and wild rhythm,  
in a bed of  
lost birds and feathers,

smiling, dying.

This poem depicts fairly well the traditional expectations of young women waiting for a man to marry. "Not Quite Spring," from the same book, is another poem about sexual longing and another example of a more general, more controlled, use of female

experience:

Baby you know I get high  
on you, come back with me  
whispering in her ear  
it was all she could do to say  
no, spring leaves budding,  
his hand on her breast  
crocus smell and  
everything unfolding  
she gasping I want, I  
would but instead hurrying  
back to the windowless room  
where she locks the heavy door.  
Lemons are rotting on her pillow,  
she studies her nipples,  
nyloned crotch in mirror  
then hugs her huge body to sleep.

Lifshin represents the liberated female consciousness first explored in the early 1920's carried to extremes. Because many of her poems are shallow, they seem to exploit this consciousness rather than to explore it. They seem too easy and thus cheap, too close to pornography and thus too far from poetry.

Marge Piercy

The women must learn to dare to speak.  
The men must learn to bother to listen.  
The women must learn to say I think this is so.  
The men must learn to stop dancing on the ceiling.  
(from "Councils": New American and Canadian Poetry, an anthology)

Marge Piercy was born in Detroit, received a Master's degree from Northwestern, and has been married twice. Her first book of poetry, Breaking Camp, was published in 1968; her second, Hard Loving, in 1969. 4-Telling, a book which contains her

poems as well as some by three other young poets, was published in 1971. She also has had two novels published.

In her first book, Piercy seems to be trying too hard to be cool or tough. For example, in "the once-in-a-lifetime warehouse sale" she describes drab lives in terms of repossessed furniture which, she writes, costs "balls down." She describes "rooms . . ./where trucks fart into the blind windows" and rooms "of pierced mirrors masturbating." These images seem far-fetched. Also in this first book, she tries too hard to sound like Sylvia Plath. She affects some of Plath's diction--words like "stall" and "hook." And her lines, like Plath's, tend to be elliptical and, thus, often obscure. In the second book, she has found her own voice, her own technique, and her own diction.

One of Piercy's main themes is Man's inhumanity: to men, women, children, beasts, and the environment. She writes, she says, "from the Movement, for the Movement." Because of these interests, there is a certain amount of proselytizing in her work. But usually she manages to bring off a poem rather than a piece of propaganda.

Woman's need for love and her difficulty in attaining it are part of Piercy's man's inhumanity to women theme. Women are rabbits: weak, frightened, vulnerable. And they are followers. Because of their strong need for love, they are willing to make sacrifices. Men, on the other hand, are hesitant to become involved; they are embarrassed by or even hostile because of the

woman's need and passion. The conclusion to "Burying Blues for Janis" (New American and Canadian Poetry, an anthology: 1971), an elegiac poem for Janis Joplin, illustrates:

You embodied that good done-in mama who gives and gives  
like a fountain of boozy chicken soup to a ratrace of  
men.  
You embodied the pain hugged to the breasts like a  
baby.  
You embodied the beautiful blowsy gum of passivity,  
woman on her back to the world endlessly  
hopelessly raggedly  
offering a brave front to be fucked.  
That willingness to hang on the meathook and call it  
love,  
that need for loving like a screaming hollow in the  
soul,  
that's the drug that hangs us and drags us down  
deadly as the icy sleet of skag that froze your blood.

Lines from another poem called "The Nuisance" (The Little Magazine: Fall-Winter, 1971-72) illustrate in a more personal manner the woman's need and the man's reaction:

I am an inconvenient woman.  
I'd be more useful as a pencil sharpener or an adding  
machine.  
. . .  
I love you when you are discussing changes in the  
class structure  
and I am not supposed to, and it crowds my eyes  
and jams my ears and burns in the tips of my fingers.  
I am an inconvenient woman.  
You might trade me in on a sheepdog or a llama.  
You might trade me in for a yak.  
They are faithful and noiseless and demand only straw.  
They make good overcoats.  
They never call you up on the telephone.

. . .

The woman is "inconvenient" because for her love is all absorbing.  
She is thinking of love when the man is thinking of politics.  
And she makes demands on the man with which he does not want to



be bothered. What he wants is someone (something) practical and useful. What she wants is for the man to pay attention to her as a unique individual:

I want to tell you about when I was ten and it  
thundered.  
I want you to kiss the crosshatched remains of my burn.  
. . .  
I want you to read my old loverletters.  
I want you to want to.

. . .

And the final stanza of the poem contains a good domestic image which reiterates her desire for his love:

I want you to want me  
as directly and simply and variously  
as a cup of hot coffee.  
. . .

A short poem called "The Friend" (Hard Loving) is Piercy's most bitter poem about male reaction to female nature:

We sat across the table.  
he said, cut off your hands,  
they are always poking at things.  
they might touch me.  
I said yes.  
  
Food grew cold on the table.  
he said, burn your body.  
it is not clean and smells like sex.  
it rubs my mind sore.  
I said yes.  
  
I love you, I said.  
that's very nice, he said  
I like to be loved,  
that makes me happy.  
Have you cut off your hands yet?

This man cannot give love, and he can take it only as long as it is not sexual. He is repulsed by the woman's femininity.

Piercy also portrays men as leaders. A woman can choose to follow one, but she cannot possess him. In "Breaking Camp," she writes: "You go on and I follow, I choose and follow" and, "You belong to me no more than the sun that pounds on my head." In "Easy" (Hard Loving), she writes:

. . .  
women want to attack me  
with envy  
with purses and nails.  
I should whisper to them  
no, no, he is not mine  
we are guests together  
. . .

But Piercy is not just another hostile female. She is different from most of her contemporaries because she gives advice to affect the kinds of changes she believes will help us all to "waken finally to being human." This line is quoted from "The Tarot Poems" (New American and Canadian Poetry, Fall 1972). In these poems, Piercy offers advice such as: "Live a life you can endure: make love that is loving," and: "Live as if you liked yourself," and: "Grow into your horse, let there be/no more riders or ridden." She is talking about her own experience and awareness and participation in the revolutionary women's movement on one level and about the revolutionary movement in general on another. She adds:

Before, I shuffled and giggled and kept my eyes down,  
tucking my shoulders in so I would not rub the walls  
of the rut, the place, the role.  
Now anger blisters me.  
My pride rumbles, sputtering lava.  
Every day is dangerous and glad.

"Why do you choose to be noisy, to fight, to make  
troubles?"  
you ask me, not understanding, I have been born raw and  
new.  
I can be killed with ease, I can be cut right down  
but I cannot crawl back in the cavern  
where I lay with my neck bowed.  
I have grown. I am not by myself.  
I am too many.

Her belief that she is one of many gives authority to her voice  
here. Also, there is sincerity and determination and dedication  
in these "Tarot Poems," which are among her latest work; and a  
refreshing optimism is apparent in the concluding stanza:

The sun is rising, feel it: the air smells fresh.  
I cannot look in the sun's face, its brightness blinds  
me  
but from my own shadow becoming distinct  
I know that now at last  
it is beginning to grow light.

#### Summary

Certain generalizations can be made, of course, about  
these six women. For example, the influence of the two major  
women poets of this century, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Sylvia  
Plath, can be clearly seen in the work of some (Millay in  
Levertov's and Brooks's; Plath in Sexton's and Piercy's) but is  
not apparent in the work of others. Also, Levertov and Piercy  
both consider themselves "Revolutionaries," and their ideology is  
apparent in their work; Sexton and Lifshin enjoy shocking their  
readers; Brooks and Jong are both satirists on occasion. But it  
is their differences which are most interesting to me, their own  
uniquely individual voices. They all write out of their own  
female and domestic experience; but they are interested in differ-

ent aspects of these subjects, and they use them in different ways. Their subjects, their techniques, their voices vary, but all are aware and articulate women who write out of and about the domestic, familial and sexual experiences of women.

Gwendolyn Brooks uses domesticity to create portraits of people; those of women are especailly interesting and strong as are many poetic character portraits of women by women. Her sympathy for people sometimes approaches sentimentality, but she usually avoids it. Denise Levertov draws parallels between common everyday experiences and larger concerns in a delicate and controlled manner. Her "liberated" diction is interesting but basically unnecessary. Anne Sexton is interested in familial relationships and in the female body. Although she sometimes strives unsuccessfully for novel effects, she is an originator. Erica Jong is one of the modern militant feminists. She has a keen sense of humor and deals with sexual experience in new and surprising ways. Lyn Lifshin is a talented poet who, nevertheless, illustrates one of the dangers of the new freedoms of subject and expression. She frequently writes about sexual experience on a superficial level. Her huge success with editors who enjoy frank writing by a woman regardless of its degree of complexity or poetic skill may cause her to neglect the deepening and polishing her writing needs. And Marge Piercy represents the women poets who grow out of obvious and superficial imitations of Plath. She is one of the few women poets who see and voice possible solutions to the problems of being a female and a human

being in today's society. In my opinion, the optimism she envisions in another context applies to the state of women's poetry today as well. To repeat her lines from "The Tarot Poems" is to sum up this optimism: "I know that now at last/it is beginning to grow light."

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APPENDIX

Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree by Edna St. Vincent Millay

I

So she came back into his house again  
And watched beside his bed until he died,  
Loving him not at all. The winter rain  
Splashed in the painted butter-tub outside,  
Where once her red geraniums had stood,  
Where still their rotted stalks were to be seen;  
The tin log snapped; and she went out for wood,  
Bareheaded, running the few steps between  
The house and shed; there, from the sodden eaves  
Blown back and forth on ragged ends of twine,  
Saw the defected creeping-jinny vine,  
(And one, big-aproned, blithe, with stiff blue sleeves  
Rolled to the shoulder that warm day in spring,  
Who planted seeds, musing ahead to their far blossoming).

II

The last white sawdust on the floor was grown  
Gray as the first, so long had he been ill;  
The axe was nodding in the block; fresh-blown  
And foreign came the rain across the sill,  
But on the roof so steadily it drummed  
She could not think a time it might not be--  
In hazy summer, when the hot air hummed  
With mowing, and locusts rising raspingly,  
When that small bird with iridescent wings  
And long incredible sudden silver tongue  
Had just flashed (and yet maybe not!) among  
The dwarf nasturtiums--when no sagging springs  
Of shower were in the whole bright sky, somehow  
Upon this roof the rain would drum as it was drumming now.

III

She filled her arms with wood, and set her chin  
Forward, to hold the highest stick in place,  
No less afraid than she had always been  
Of spiders up her arms and on her face,  
But too impatient for a careful search  
Or a less heavy loading, from the heap  
Selecting hastily small sticks of birch,  
For their curled bark, that instantly will leap  
Into a blaze, nor thinking to return  
Some day, distracted, as of old, to find  
Smooth, heavy, round, green logs with a wet, gray rind  
Only, and knotty chunks that will not burn,  
(That day when dust is on the wood-box floor,  
And some old catalogue, and a brown, shriveled apple core).

IV

The white bark writhed and sputtered like a fish  
Upon the coals, exuding odorous smoke.  
She knelt and blew, in a surging desolate wish  
For comfort; and the sleeping ashes woke  
And scattered to the hearth, but no thin fire  
Broke suddenly, the wood was wet with rain.  
Then, softly stepping forth from her desire,  
(Being mindful of like passion hurled in vain  
Upon a similar task, in other days)  
She thrust her breath against the stubborn coal,  
Bringing to bear upon its hilt the whole  
Of her still body . . . there sprang a little blaze . . .  
A pack of hounds, the flame swept up the flue!--  
And the blue night stood flattened against the window,  
staring through.

V

A wagon stopped before the house; she heard  
The heavy oilskins of the grocer's man  
Slapping against his legs. Of a sudden whirred  
Her heart like a frightened partridge, and she ran  
And slid the bolt, leaving his entrance free;  
Then in the cellar way till he was gone  
Hid, breathless, praying that he might not see  
The chair sway she had laid her hand upon  
In passing. Sour and damp from that dark vault  
Arose to her the well-remembered chill;  
She saw the narrow wooden stairway still  
Plunging into the earth, and the thin salt  
Crusting the crocks; until she knew him far,  
So stood, with listening eyes upon the empty doughnut jar.

VI

Then cautiously she pushed the cellar door  
And stepped into the kitchen--saw the track  
Of muddy rubber boots across the floor,  
The many paper parcels in a stack  
Upon the dresser; with accustomed care  
Removed the twine and put the wrappings by,  
Folded, and the bags flat, that with an air  
Of ease had been whipped open skillfully,  
To the gape of children. Treacherously dear  
And simple was the dull, familiar task.  
And so it was she came at length to ask:  
How came the soda there? The sugar here?  
Then the dream broke. Silent, she brought the mop,  
And forced the trade-slip on the nail that held his razor  
strop.



VII

One way there was of muting in the mind  
A little while the ever-clamorous care;  
And there was rapture, of a decent kind,  
In making mean and ugly objects fair:  
Soft-sooted kettle-bottoms, that had been  
Time after time set in above the fire,  
Faucets, and candlesticks, corroded green,  
To mine again from quarry; to attire  
The shelves in paper petticoats, and tack  
New oilcloth in the ringed-and-rotten's place,  
Polish the stove till you could see your face,  
And after nightfall rear an aching back  
In a changed kitchen, bright as a new pin,  
An advertisement, far too fine to cook a supper in.

VIII

She let them leave their jellies at the door  
And go away, reluctant, down the walk.  
She heard them talking as they passed before  
The blind, but could not quite make out their talk  
For noise in the room--the sudden heavy fall  
And roll of a charred log, and the roused shower  
Of snapping sparks; then sharply from the wall  
The unforgivable crowing of the hour.  
One instant set ajar, her quiet ear  
Was stormed and forced by the full rout of day:  
The rasp of a saw, the fussy cluck and bray  
Of hens, the wheeze of a pump, she needs must hear;  
She inescapably must endure to feel  
Across her teeth the grinding of a backing wagon wheel.

IX

Not over-kind nor over-quick in study  
Nor skilled in sports nor beautiful was he,  
Who had come into her life when anybody  
Would have been welcome, so in need was she.  
They had become acquainted in this way:  
He flashed a mirror in her eyes at school;  
By which he was distinguished; from that day  
They went about together, as a rule.  
She told, in secret and with whispering,  
How he had flashed a mirror in her eyes;  
And as she told, it struck her with surprise  
That this was not so wonderful a thing.  
But what's the odds?--It's pretty nice to know  
You've got a friend to keep you company everywhere you go.

X

She had forgotten how the August night  
Was level as a lake beneath the moon,  
In which she swam a little, losing sight  
Of shore; and how the boy, who was at noon  
Simple enough, not different from the rest,  
Wore now a pleasant mystery as he went,  
Which seemed to her an honest enough test  
Whether she loved him, and she was content.  
So loud, so loud the million crickets' choir . . .  
So sweet the night, so long-drawn-out and late . . .  
And if the man were not her spirit's mate,  
Why was her body sluggish with desire?  
Stark on the open field the moonlight fell,  
But the oak tree's shadow was deep and black and secret  
as a well.

XI

It came into her mind, seeing how the snow  
Was gone, and the brown grass exposed again,  
And clothes-pins, and an apron--long ago,  
In some white storm that sifted through the pane  
And sent her forth reluctantly at last  
To gather in, before the line gave way,  
Garments, board-stiff, that galloped on the blast  
Clashing like angel armies in a fray,  
An apron long ago in such a night  
Blown down and buried in the deepening drift,  
To lie till April thawed it back to sight,  
Forgotten, quaint and novel as a gift--  
It struck her, as she pulled and pried and tore,  
That here was spring, and the whole year to be lived  
through once more.

XII

Tenderly, in those times, as though she fed  
An ailing child--with sturdy propping up  
Of its small, feverish body in the bed,  
And steadying of its hands about the cup--  
She gave her husband of her body's strength,  
Thinking of men, what helpless things they were,  
Until he turned and fell asleep at length,  
And stealthily stirred the night and spoke to her.  
Familiar, at such moments, like a friend,  
Whistled far off the long, mysterious train,  
And she could see in her mind's vision plain  
The magic World, where cities stood on end . . .  
Remote from where she lay--and yet--between,  
Save for something asleep beside her, only the window screen.

XIII

From the wan dream that was her waking day,  
Wherein she journeyed, borne along the ground  
Without her own volition in some way,  
Or fleeing, motionless, with feet fast bound,  
Or running silent through a silent house  
Sharply remembered from an earlier dream,  
Upstairs, down other stairs, fearful to rouse,  
Regarding him, the wide and empty scream  
Of a strange sleeper on a malignant bed,  
And all the time not certain if it were  
Herself so doing or some one like to her,  
From this wan dream that was her daily bread,  
Sometimes, at night, incredulous, she would wake--  
A child, blowing bubbles that the chairs and carpet did  
not break!

XIV

She had a horror he would die at night.  
And sometimes when the light began to fade  
She could not keep from noticing how white  
The birches looked--and then she would be afraid,  
Even with a lamp, to go about the house  
And lock the windows; and as night wore on  
Toward morning, if a dog howled, or a mouse  
Squeaked in the floor, long after it was gone  
Her flesh would sit awry on her. By day  
She would forget somewhat, and it would seem  
A silly thing to go with just this dream  
And get a neighbor to come at night and stay.  
But it would strike her sometimes, making the tea:  
She had kept that kettle boiling all night long, for company.

XV

There was upon the sill a pencil mark,  
Vital with shadow when the sun stood still  
At noon, but now, because the day was dark,  
It was a pencil mark upon the sill.  
And the mute clock, maintaining ever the same  
Dead moment, blank and vacant of itself,  
Was a pink shepherdess, a picture frame,  
A shell marked Souvenir, there on the shelf.  
Whence it occurred to her that he might be,  
The mainspring being broken in his mind,  
A clock himself, if one were so inclined,  
That stood at twenty minutes after three--  
The reason being for this, it might be said,  
That things in death were neither clocks nor people,  
but only dead.

XVI

The doctor asked her what she wanted done  
With him, that could not lie there many days.  
And she was shocked to see how life goes on  
Even after death, in irritating ways;  
And mused how if he had not died at all  
'Twould have been easier--then there need not be  
The stiff disorder of a funeral  
Everywhere, and the hideous industry,  
And crowds of people calling her by name  
And questioning her, she'd never seen before,  
But only watching by his bed once more  
And sitting silent if a knocking came . . .  
She said at length, feeling the doctor's eyes,  
"I don't know what you do exactly when a person dies."

XVII

Gazing upon him now, severe and dead,  
It seemed a curious thing that she had lain  
Beside him many a night in that cold bed,  
And that had been which would not be again.  
From his desirous body the great heat  
Was gone at last, it seemed, and the taut nerves  
Loosened forever. Formally the sheet  
Set forth for her today those heavy curves  
And lengths familiar as the bedroom door.  
She was as one who enters, sly, and proud,  
To where her husband speaks before a crowd,  
And sees a man she never saw before--  
The man who eats his victuals at her side,  
Small, and absurd, and hers: for once, not hers,  
unclassified.